Establishing Equivalence: Difficulties for Interpreters in a Globalizing World

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Contents

I. Introduction

Interpreters and translators have always been concerned with the facilitation of contact between different languages and different cultures. In a globalizing world where cultures and languages are in closer contact than ever before, their role is particularly important. Paradoxically, however, the closer contact has also brought into relief the difficulty of finding equivalences, the depth of the potential and actual differences between language use in different contexts, and the ever-changing nature of linguistic and cultural phenomena: "The tendency in literature on globalization to focus on specific,

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substitutive features of language and cultural difference can obscure more intractable problems of cultural dissimilarity" (Cronin 18).

The term 'globalization' itself is by no means fixed in its meaning, and its translations into other languages may also not be straightforward. In French, for example, the word "mondialisation" is characterized as "abusif" (imprecise): "La traduction du mot en anglais pose beaucoup de problemes" (The translation of the word into English causes many problems) (Griffiths 79).

In this paper, I will examine the dynamism that characterizes language in context and will explore the consequences for interpreters and translators as professionals and the implications for professional training.

II. Standardization

Negotiations in world trade and global politics demand that there is an agreed lexicon of standard terminology, and a very large number of human and financial resources have been and continue to be put into establishing exact equivalences, mostly at the level of the lexicon. Transnational organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations, as well as different arms of national governments, need to spend significant portions of their budgets on translation and interpreting.

In the European Parliament, the interpreting directorate employs approximately 240 permanent staff interpreters and relies on a reserve of more than 1000 auxiliary conference interpreters, of whom between 200 and 500 must be recruited each day to cover its needs. In 2002, the total volume of activity represented 56,000 interpreter days for the European Parliament organs alone.

> The European Parliament is unique among international organizations in that it has to provide a full multilingual environment. The right of every Member to follow debates and express himself/herself in their own mother language is explicitly provided for in the Parliament's Rules of Procedure.
>
> (European Parliament)

Even the English-speaking countries, where, because of the dominance of English-language material worldwide, the need for translation and interpreting might be expected to be lower than elsewhere, spend enormous amounts on translating from other languages. The relatively small British Department of Foreign Affairs, for example, spends over three-quarters of a million pounds per annum on **in-house** translating and interpreting alone, and also uses external professionals (Hansard).

In this context it is clearly desirable, not only for accuracy, but also from an economic point of view, for they're to be some degree of agreement about standard terminology and use of language. In reality, however, defining what is standard and what is not is an area of considerable complexity. As Randolph Quirk noted in his 1985 *Grammar of the English Language*: "There are few enough that would claim the existence of a single standard [and] plenty that would even deny both the possibility and the desirability of such a thing. Recent emphasis has been on multiple and variable standards…: different standards for different occasions for different people—and each as 'correct' as any other" (Quirk 2-3). In their edited volume on *Standard English: The widening debate*, Bex and Watts (5) note that "notions of 'Standard English' vary from country to country, and not merely in the ways in which such a variety is described but also in the prestige in which it is held and the functions it has developed to perform".

Similar debates exist in other countries for other languages, even in those countries where an official academy of some kind exists to

mandate what is and what is not correct usage. Materials for the learning of French as a foreign language are nowadays likely to talk about "la Francophonie" rather than only "la France," in an acknowledgment that there is considerable variation between metropolitan and other varieties of French. And despite the best efforts of the *Académie Française*, the French continue to borrow from English and other languages in their everyday conversation and in their writing. Similar efforts to standardize *Bahasa Malaysia* even in the confines of Malaysia (that is, without considering the potential wider standardization that might include Indonesia and Brunei) run into major difficulties when faced with the language that people actually speak.

III. Language variation

Unfortunately for translators, not to mention language teachers and language learners, language changes quite quickly over time as well as distance and purpose. Even at the level of single words, changes of meaning (or, perhaps, rather, the contexts in which the words are appropriately used) can have quite devastating effects. This is particularly evident in law courts, where precise translations can make the difference between imprisonment and freedom.

A British organization called Fair Trials Abroad (FTA) has uncovered a number of such cases. One of its surveys, called the European Legal Interpreter Project (ELIP), showed that often very poor interpreting and translation facilities had been provided during court cases—and sometimes no facilities at all—and that these have lead to miscarriages of justice and unnecessary hardship. One case involved an English woman who was arrested in Greece with her boy-friend. They were accused of smuggling drugs. The man was found

guilty and sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but there was no evidence at all against the woman, except that the man had described her in his own statement to the police as his "partner". This was translated into Greek using the word for business partner, which was indeed the dominant meaning of the word in English until fairly recently. What he actually meant was that she was his girl-friend or common-law wife, a usage which has grown substantially in societies such as the UK and Australia, to indicate a more serious commitment than would be suggested by girl-friend or boy-friend without resorting to the legalistic 'common-law wife' or the more physical 'lover'. Clearly this is a usage which has arisen to fill a need, and reflects changing social realities in these countries. 'Partner' is now used frequently as a gender-neutral way of referring to all of the above kinds of relationship, without the need to specify either legal status, gender, or permanence. Once this mistake had been corrected, and it was realized that she had no idea of what the man had been up to and had never had any personal or working involvement with drugs, the woman was released immediately. But she had already spent ten months in jail (De Mas).

If there is a problem at the level of single words, there are even greater dynamics at play with collocations, or the company that words keep. An active translator/interpreter has to keep reading and listening to discourse in two languages in order to keep up with changing collocations. A collocation such as "weapons of mass destruction" has become extremely common in the last two years. The words are not difficult to understand, and the specific phrase was almost certainly used before it became widespread in relation to the impending Iraq conflict. The difference from the translator/interpreter's point of view is that before its establishment as a set phrase (a phrase which is often nowadays abbreviated to its initials WMD), the translation might be any form of words that conveyed the concept, while afterwards there

had to be an equivalent set phrase that was always used to translate the phrase. Similar points might be made about other collocations that have arisen through the reporting of major world events, such as the collocations "ethnic cleansing" and "collateral damage" that emerged during the Balkan conflict, or the acronyms used for new diseases, such as AIDS and SARS, or the phrase 9/11 to refer to the attack on New York's World Trade Centre in 2001. Note that in the UK and Australia, the date 11th September would always be written 11/9, and 9/11 would have been understood, before 9/11, as 9th November. This 'rule' is now broken only in this one collocation, an established phrase which cannot be changed to 11/9 (at least not without a conscious attempt to make a point), while all other dates continue in these cultures to follow the day-month-year sequence. I do not know how 9/11 is referred to in languages that use totally different calendars, but I suspect a similar 'colonization' would be at work.

IV. Culture and genre

If translation problems such as this can be resolved with a little ingenuity and a lot of upkeep, there are some things associated with language variation that present dilemmas of an altogether different order. There are two issues in particular that pose both theoretical and practical problems. The first is the question of cultural differences and the different ways in which the same strings of words or the same actions may be interpreted in different cultural contexts. The second is the way in which communicative genres vary in both formal features and purposes according to context. These two are in fact closely related.

By culture I am referring not necessarily to a national culture, but more to any group that sees itself as a coherent entity and that

explicitly or implicitly shares certain values. These values are often made visible through the medium of language, and in particular through the generic forms that occur in the specific cultural discourse community.

In this definition of culture, we can talk, in addition to national cultures, about the culture of a company (such as 'the Hyundai corporate culture'), the culture of a profession (such as 'the financial service culture'), the culture of an activity (such as 'the mountaineering culture') or the culture of a field of study (such as 'the mathematics culture').

Communication between these cultures even using the same language is difficult, as the same words have different implications and resonances in different contexts. Native speakers of English, visiting other countries where the normal language of communication is English, are often shocked at the ways in which people in those other countries interact and at their own communicative difficulties, because the shared language leads them into a false assumption that values and ways of interpersonal communication are also shared. In the academic world, there are similar problems when different disciplines meet; people speak what is recognized as the same language, but they belong to different discourses.

That there are genuine cultural differences between nations, different ethnic groups and other kinds of different groups is nowadays not much disputed, although there still need to be sensibilities about cultural stereotyping. The dual—and opposite—fears that operate in the relatively new field of cross-cultural pragmatics are that differences are so embedded in multiple systems at many levels that there is little of any value that we can say by way of generalization: "we are all members of multiple ‘groups’—crosscutting, overlapping and ever-evolving" (Wallenstein 5, cited in Wierzbicka xiv) and that cultures are reified and treated as static,

leading to stereotyping. That similar differences exist between different disciplines has not been much explored, but there has been a recent explosion of studies in this area that focus on the idea of 'genre'.

There are various different interpretations of what is meant by 'genre'. The use of the word in this sense comes from literary studies, where 'genre' refers to the type of text produced: novels, poems, plays, and so on. When applied to all types of communication, genre simply refers to any text that is recognizable as belonging to a set of similar texts. A recipe for cooking a cake is recognizable as belonging to the genre of recipes. A sports report in a newspaper is recognized as belonging to the genre of sports reporting. A business letter is recognized as belonging to the genre of letters, and so on.

There are several different schools of thought about genres, how they are defined and what they do. Many of those people who have been involved in genre studies have had as their primary interest the application of genre studies to teaching materials, whether in language use across the curriculum (the major interest of the so-called Sydney School) or for learners of English for Specific Purposes (the major interest of John Swales, who wrote a pioneering book called *Genre Analysis* in 1990). Both of these are concerned with the predictive powers of genres, so that learners can know what to expect in a text and can learn how to understand texts efficiently and produce increasingly professional-sounding texts themselves. The Sydney School, using a systemic-functional linguistics framework, is "particularly concerned with texts as staged goal-oriented social processes which integrate field, mode and tenor in predictable ways" (Halliday & Martin 36).

Here, we are more concerned with genres in terms of what people do with them in their specific contexts, and how they may be shaped by that context while simultaneously shaping it. "It is in the context of their activities that people consider texts and give meaning to

texts. And it is in the organization of activities that people find the needs, stances, interactions, tasks that orient their attention toward texts they write and read. So to study text production, text reception, text meaning, text value apart from their animating activities is to miss the core of text's being" (Bazerman & Russell).

V. Genre shifts and intertextuality

Discourse and genre analysis have over the last few years had to face up to the criticism that they operate with a predominantly static view of discourse. "Much recent criticism of discourse analysis has centred on [its] logocentric view of communication. Short pieces of transcribed language abstracted from their physical contexts, it is argued, cannot make claims to represent face-to-face communication with all its complex modes. We need the wider context in which discourses are embedded if we are to understand them from an insider's perspective" (Roberts 84). The work of researchers such as Bhatia in Hong Kong, Bazerman and others in the United States, Wodak in Austria, and Sarangi, Roberts and others in the UK have obliged analysts to confront the ever-changing, interacting, context-dependent and colonizing nature of discourses (Bhatia; Bhatia *et al*; Bazerman; Bazerman & Paradis; Russell & Bazerman; Bazerman & Russell; Berkenkotter & Huckin; Wodak; Sarangi & van Leeuwen; Roberts *et al*).

One of the ways in which we can make sense of a specific discourse community is by examining the totality of the genres that are recognized and used in that community. This totality is called a genre repertoire. It is also sometimes referred to as a genre set or a genre collection. The genre repertoire of a community characterizes the nature of the community and its values: "Consider for example the

communicative practices of two quite different organizations. In the first the decisions are made by organizational members discussing and voting on issues in open and participative meetings. In the second, decisions are made by the leader, who then broadcasts directives by memo to organizational members. An examination of the different genres routinely enacted in these two organizations would reveal two quite different organizing processes: a democratic and an autocratic one respectively" (Orlikowsi and Yates 542).

Thus by looking at the various genres that are used in a variety of organizational contexts we cannot only identify the communicative practices of that organization but also its distinct structure.

Orlikowsi and Yates outline how genres can be recognized in organizational contexts by looking at either or both their purpose and form. They cite the examples of memos and meetings as having clearly recognizable forms and that of a proposal as being distinguishable by its purpose. They also note the importance of looking at 'genre overlap' when trying to distinguish the communicative practices that make up an organization.

Importantly for our purposes, they also discuss genre change and how genres are dynamic and can be changed either deliberately or inadvertently. Organizations, professions, human behaviour, language these are all extremely complex and in many ways unpredictable phenomena. This very complexity is what makes attempts to reduce them with neat theories so attractive, and the world is full of best-selling books from well-paid gurus which do just that, from one-minute managing and miracle diets to making friends and influencing people and learning a foreign language in a few weeks.

Understanding complexity is, in the real world, very much more challenging. The technical area of study known as complexity theory is becoming increasingly influential. The theory holds that in non-linear complex systems, such as weather systems, language,

organizational behaviour, and so on, there is in-built uncertainty, so that the position and direction of any one part of the whole cannot be predicted with certainty at any time, but the behaviour of each component may produce a reaction in other components. Chaos theory is similar, and the well-known chaos example of a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world leading to a catastrophic event in another is a good example of the uncertainty and unpredictability central to complexity.

Complexity theory focuses on the ways in which people try to find patterns, order and structure in the unstructured world.

Individual texts can only be fully understood and analysed in their specific context. All texts, in whatever mode, are related either implicitly or explicitly and either deliberately or unintentionally to other texts. At the simplest level, we may recognize a particular text as an instantiation of a genre. For example, we open an envelope to find an invoice from the electricity company, and we recognize it, through certain generic features (the windowed envelope, the layout, the itemisation of electricity usage, the headings, the details of how to pay, etc), as a demand for payment. When we respond by saying something like "Oh, no, not another bill" we are relating this bill and its implications to the genre of bills and the activities that are associated with them.

When we look at a genre repertoire, we find that the genres relate to each other, and individual genres cannot be fully understood without reference to the whole repertoire. Genres refer to other genres, texts refer to other texts, and discourses refer to other discourses.

The notion of intertextuality, or interdiscursivity, where texts can only be understood in relation to other texts, like the word 'genre', has its roots in literary theory, in particular Russian formalist theory. In formalist theory "A text's standing as 'literature' its ability to fulfill the function of defamiliarization was not given for all time but was said to

depend on the nature of the relationships it established with other texts within a given 'literary system'" (Bennett 46).

Complexity and the dynamic nature of texts and genres are problematic for translators. The 'same' genres may exhibit considerable differences in different cultures, in terms of the value placed on them, their formal appearance, and their function within the culture.

VI. Genre studies: some examples

Zhu Yunxia, using a Swalesian move-structure analysis, examined a corpus of Australian English and Mainland China sales letters. These are the kinds of computer-generated personalized letters that are sent out to large numbers of people on a mailing-list. Zhu found that the Chinese letters, while still having the same overall purpose of trying to sell goods or services, had two additional discourse moves, covering in particular the attempt to establish a long-term client-company loyalty relationship. The simple translation of a sales letter from one language to the other would not, in this case, produce a letter that meets the normal cultural expectations of the end-users.

There is a similar, much-analysed case of a business letter translated from English into German, in which the German version projected an image of the writer that was much more forceful and directive than the English original. This was originally analysed by Julianne House in 1977, and she originally concluded that the translator had been influenced by unjustified cultural stereotypes. Her later analysis (1997) acknowledged, however, that there are genuine differences in cultural expectations, and that the translation was more effective than a literal rendering would have been. This case is discussed in Hatim's *Teaching and Researching Translation* (94-7).

In the case of academic writing, in the words of Mark Waldo: "What may have been vague and controversial a decade ago has now become widely accepted that postsecondary institutions are loose affiliations of separate disciplines, with specialized languages and frames for thinking, and their own values, purposes, and forms for writing" (97). A phrase frequently used to characterize a group such as an academic discipline is "discourse community"; students attempt through their learning and through their communication practices to be initiated, or apprenticed, into this discourse community, which "has shared preoccupations, values and skills" (Jones & Sin x). Jones and Sin, respectively a discourse analyst and an accountancy lecturer, brought their different skills together to write materials for use in accountancy programs.

Writers who write technical English for diverse audiences have to make pragmatic decisions about the words they use and the tone they establish. A common example is the medical brochure commonly found in doctors' waiting-rooms, which has to tread a fine line between the competing discourses of warning and reassurance, much in the same way as a doctor has to think when talking with a patient. Similar pragmatic decisions can be seen in instructions and standard operating procedures. One instance can be found in Daborn & Miller's interesting account of "doing engineering globally", where even individual technical terms have to be co-constructed: "Selection of a parameter name takes into account that there is a variation between languages and within branches of engineering, but commonality in mathematical background pragmatism is the basis for the writing of successful, usable documentation (Daborn & Miller 37).

VII. Conclusion

All of this variation within each language, and the fact that languages and culturesare constantly changing phenomena, make life very difficult for the dedicated translator and interpreter. It may be felt that the task is impossible. Courage can be taken from the fact that language itself is so complex and dynamic that it should be difficult for children to learn to speak, but they still do. As Peter Bosch says: "The child who is exposed to ... partial explanations witnesses the growth of something more appropriately called a jungle of definitions: intersecting, contradicting each other, complementing each other, pushing each other aside, and still leaving whole areas of untouched desert land in between and wide unexplored oceans around the buzzing jungle" (191). Yet the child, despite the jungles, deserts and oceans, does learn to use language. And novice translators and interpreters can learn to become members of the profession, but they must have exposure during their training to different genres, different discourse communities, and different cultures, and learn to take into account the challenges that the field of cross-cultural pragmatics throws in their way.

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Abstract

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Despite the increasing need for standardization and agreed equivalences in a globalizing world, the dynamic natures of both language and culture make standardization difficult. This paper examines this dynamism at the levels of terminology, collocation, genre, culture and intertextuality. It shows that the dependence of language on context for production and interpretation means that a true equivalence can never be found, and that interpreters, translators, writers, teachers and all others who work with language have to deal in pragmatic decision-making.

Key words: genre, intertextual, intercultural, standardization, interpreting