

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339658502>

The Importance of Linguistics to Translation

Article · August 2016

CITATIONS

0

READS

4,480

1 author:



Patricia Ngozi

National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Nigeria

11 PUBLICATIONS 13 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Trilingual Dictionary :Anaan - English - French and Translation of Nigeria and the World Trade Organisation by Osita C. Eze into French [View project](#)



ANAAÑ LANGUAGE SERIES [View project](#)

The Importance of Linguistics to Translation

IJIOMA Patricia Ngozi

National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba Nigeria

Abstract: *Translation is a process of transferring a message from one language to another. To be a translator, the basic requirement is a good knowledge of the working languages. It then implies that translation cannot exist without language. Linguistics is the scientific study of language and language is at crossroads of all disciplines. This requires a translator to go beyond the linguistic aspects of the language to the extra linguistics. This paper discusses the relevance of linguistics to translation, since the two work with a common tool, language, which is aimed at communication.*

Key words: Linguistics, Translation, Language, culture and communication

Résumé : *La traduction est un processus de transfert d'un message d'une langue vers une autre. Pour traduire, le traducteur doit avoir une connaissance profonde des deux langues de travail. Cela implique que la langue fait une partie intégrale de la traduction. La linguistique est l'étude scientifique du langage humain étant donné que la langue est au carrefour de toutes disciplines. Le traducteur doit donc tenir compte d'aspects linguistiques et extralinguistiques. Dans notre travail, nous traitons l'importance de la linguistique à la traduction : les deux ont le même but, la communication en utilisant la langue.*

Mots clés : Linguistique, traduction, langue, culture et communication

Introduction

Translation as we know is the transfer of meaning from one language to another. It is not the transfer of words from one language to another. This is because languages are not just different words. Translation then, represents the transformation of thoughts, feelings or desires, originally designed in one language into the same kind of thoughts, feelings and desires in another language. In other words, translation mediates between languages. House (2009:11) defines translation as “*not only a linguistic act, it is also a cultural one, an act of communication across cultures*”.

Linguistics, on the other hand, is the scientific study of language. It has three categories: the language form, the language meaning and language in context. This is further divided into subfields which include morphology, phonology, syntax, semantics etc. Although linguistics is a study of language, a number of other disciplines are relevant to language and intersect with it. The relationship between translation and linguistics will be discussed. This of course will lead to the discovery of the impact the knowledge of linguistics makes in the translation process.

1. Sources of Data Collection

The data in the paper were collected from Ijioma (2010; 2015), Ijioma and Ezeafulukwe (2015) and Onukawa (2011).

1.1 Translation theories and linguistics

Translation process is backed by different theories proposed by different linguists at different times. Each definition of translation is as a result of one theory or the other. The translation theories include linguistic theory which is based on the comparison of literary texts rather than of literary genres and stylistic features. Sociolinguistic theory focuses on both the linguistic and extra linguistic aspects of the text. Skopos theory is governed by purpose of the translation. Communicative and interpretative theories stress the meaning of a text. Linguistic theory views translation as a linguistic activity. According to Catford (1965:20) translation is:

The replacement of textual material in one language (source language) by equivalent textual material in another language (target language)

There are various branches of linguistics which include historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, computational linguistics and stylistics etc. Hodges (no date) opines that

The linguistic approach to translation incorporates the following: meaning, equivalence, shift, text purpose and analysis, and discourse register; which can be examined in the contexts of structural and functional linguistics, semantics, pragmatics correspondence, sociolinguistics and stylistics.

The implication from the above is that in the study of language, many aspects of life come into play both linguistics and extra linguistics. A translator acts as a mediator between languages. And language according to Bellos (2011:349) is “*how a social group constitutes and identifies itself*”. Language is culturally embedded. It both expresses and shapes cultural reality, and the meanings of linguistic items. Translation mediates not only between languages but also between cultures. House (2001:3) is of the same view that

Translation mediates between languages, societies and literatures, and it is through translation that linguistic and cultural barriers may be overcome.

III. Relationship between translation and linguistics

The act of translation attracts the attention of many disciplines and methods, especially contrastive analysis. Computational linguistics applies computer technology to address questions in theoretical linguistics as well as to create applications for use in data retrieval, machine translation and other uses. Tymoczko (2007) opines that:

translation involves negotiating fundamental linguistic and cultural asymmetries. Examples might include lexical asymmetries based on contrast, such as yes/no in English vs. oui/non/si in French...

Lexical asymmetries also are apparent in differences in semantic fields of corresponding words across two languages and in divergent patterns of semiosis. There are also morphological asymmetries such as the tense differences between languages that require distinguishing completed action from continuous action, or distinction in languages that mark gender or number and those that do not. Syntax is also often highly variable between languages, particularly in translation across two language families, and idioms are by definition almost always asymmetrical across languages. (Tymoczko:2013). The knowledge of linguistics can be applied in translation and interpreting. This kind of analysis can be successfully applied in looking at structures and idioms of one language and comparing them to their semantic counterparts in another language. In this era of information technology and machine translations, computational linguistics is very important. In some cases, it is observed that a particular phrase, idiom or concept exists only in one language or it is a common expression in several languages.

Phonology a branch of linguistics deals with sounds systems of a language which include tones and intonation. A word can mean different things if not properly tone marked. This leads to ambiguity and wrong information which sometimes may be life threatening. Citing Igbo language as an example, we have words with the same orthography but different meanings. The only way to decipher the meanings is by tone marks. Here are some examples:

Akwa could mean cry, egg, cloth, bed without the right tones.

ákwá	cry
ákwà	cloth
àkwà	bed
àkwá	egg

Egbe could mean gun or kite; *Otu* could mean one or vagina; *Isi* could mean head, smell or blindness; *Odu* could mean tail or piston. etc.

égbè	gun
égbé	kite
Òtú	one
Ọtụ	vagina
Ódú	piston
Òdú	tail etc.

Each language has its own structure, and the structure of language falls within the domain of linguistics. A translator should be conversant with the structures of his working languages. The problems of translation are closely related to the problems of linguistics analysis, and therefore, to the theory of language learning and that makes translation a discipline in applied linguistics. The knowledge attained in linguistics

has many practical applications including translation which plays a vital role in the transfer of information from one linguistic code to another. Some examples are given below to buttress the points cited above.

Igbo : Diochi anaghị ekwucha ihe ọhuru na elu nkwu.

Literal : wine tapper not talk all see on top palm tree.

English : Keep secret, secret.

Igbo : Nwata bulie nna ya elu, ọgọdọ ayọchie ya anya.

Literal : child carry father up loin cloth cover his eyes.

English : One does not insult an elder without adverse consequences.

Igbo : Anaghị agba aka ahụ nwata eze.

Literal : not empty hand see child teeth.

English : Nothing goes for nothing

Igbo : Nkita richa nsi, eze ere ewu.

Literal : dog eat faeces teeth decay goat.

English : You rob Peter to pay Paul.

Igbo : Ihe ejina waa ọgọdọ ma amụ aputala.

Literal : thing use make loincloth penis not show.

English : The end justifies the means.

Here are some idioms:

Igbo : Obi bụ onye isi ike.

Literal : Obi is person head strong.

English : Obi is a stubborn person.

Igbo : Ada di ime ọkwa.

Literal : Ada is pregnant eagle.

English : Ada is pregnant out of wedlock.

If the words used in these idioms are taken on their face value, they will give different meanings altogether. This is because words or signifiers have significant role to play in decoding meaning. If the translator does not understand the meaning of the words and phrases in the source text, he would not be able to convey the correct meaning into the target language. The translator should be aware of the historical and cultural background of both the source and target languages. Translation and language are embedded in social and cultural systems. Translation should therefore be seen as both a linguistic and cultural activity. According to House (2009:11)

Translation is not only a linguistic act, it is also a cultural one, an act of communication across culture. Translating always involves both language and culture simply because the two cannot be really separated.

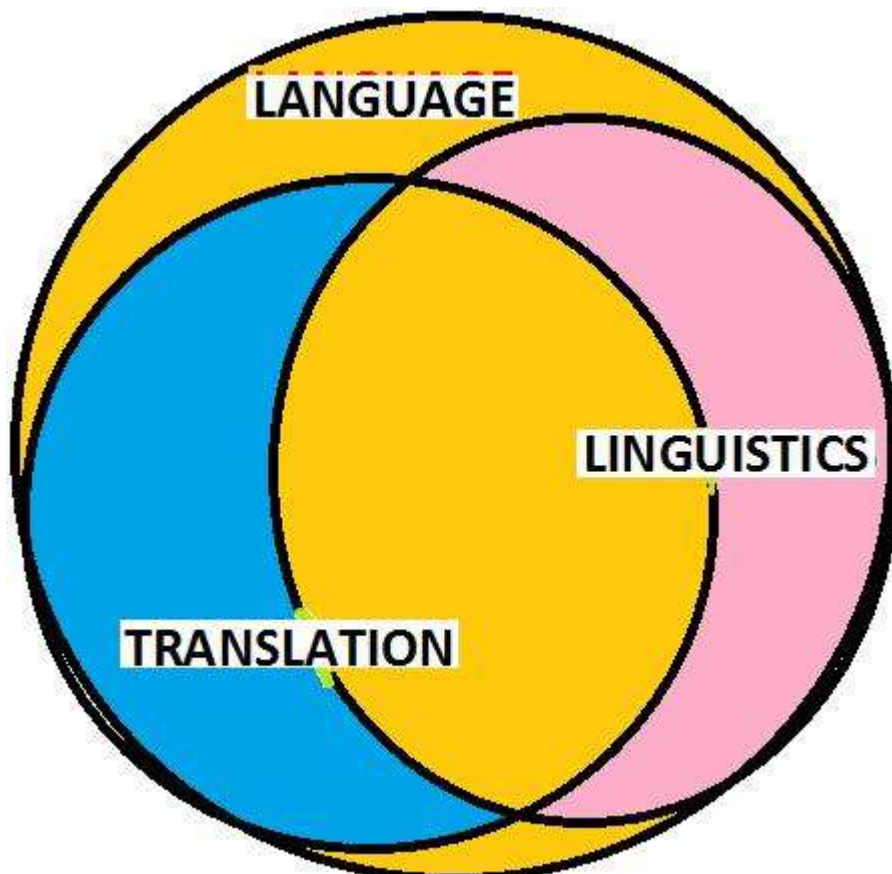
Words as basic concepts in context have an important role in translation. Certain English concepts do not exist in Igbo, for example; *Snow, Winter, Cheese* etc. Also in Igbo, at the word level, we have *Ọji, Ụguru, nkwu* etc. These concepts do not exist in English. In Igbo, tortoise is assigned a male status, while in French it is a female, and a queen at that. In the same vein, while the tortoise is seen as being cunning in Igbo, it is the fox that is regarded as such in English. Translation equivalence can be stipulated explicitly or implicitly, as can any linguistic behavior including grammar or lexis.

Examples:

English French Igbo

Tortoise	la tortue	Mbe
King	le roi	Eze
Queen	la reine	Ugoeze

If the translator is not conversant with the structures of both languages, it becomes impossible to transfer the meaning from one language to the other. Jakobson (2009:139) observes that “no one can understand ‘cheese’ unless he has an acquaintance with the meaning assigned to this word in the lexical code of English”. The Igbo proverbs and idioms cited above, will pose some problems if the translator is not acquainted with the historical and social background of the Igbo people which gave rise to them. Communication as we can see comprises both linguistic and non linguistic action. According to Brisset (2009:337) “language is an indispensable element in the realization of verbal act. It is a necessary precondition for communication”. Depending on what language you are translating, the same concepts may translate differently between countries, as words may convey different meanings depending on the location that they are used. Mistranslating may become offensive. Language, linguistics and translation are asymmetrically related, this can best be described by this diagram.



(Ijioma P.N 2015)

Conclusion

Translation has remained a central component of the language learning process because it uses materials and results from other linguistic disciplines. It is a known fact that without language, translation cannot exist and a translator cannot work without the knowledge of both the source and target languages. Cross-linguistics understanding underlies the reading and writing skills necessary for translation, translation description and translation criticism. Since linguistics gives one an understanding of the mechanics of language, knowledge of linguistics will be of great help to the translator. Catford (1965:1) describes this better in his definition of translation as, “*an operation performed on languages*”. Studying linguistics enables one to learn how language works, how it changes and varies, how it is used, preserved and processed. When you study linguistics, you are at the crossroad of every discipline and translation too is at the crossroad of every discipline. Fawcett (1997:2) observes that “*a translator who lacks at least a basic knowledge of linguistics is somebody who is working with an incomplete toolkit*”.

Finally, a translator works with language and linguistics is the scientific study of language. The two work together for a better result. This is because a translator ensures a correct translation. If the language is not correct, what is said is not what is meant, and then there is no communication. We should note that the main aim of language and translation is communication.

References

- Bellos D., 2011: *Is that a Fish in your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, London, Penguin Books, 390p.
- Brisset A., 2009: The Search for a Native Language: Translation and Cultural Identity, Translated by Rosalind Gill and Roger Gannon, *Translation Studies Reader*, (ed. Venuti Lawrence) London, Routledge, pp. 337-368.
- Catford J. C., 1965: *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, London. Oxford University Press. 105p.
- Fawcett P., 1997: *Translation and Language: Linguistics Theory Explained*, Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing.
- House, J., 2009: *Translation: Oxford Introduction to Language Study*, (ed.) H.G Widdowson, Oxford University Press 122p.
- Jakobson R., 2009: On Linguistics Aspects of Translation, *Translation Studies Reader*, (ed.) Venuti, Lawrence, London, Routledge. pp. 138-151.
- Tymoczko, M., 2007: *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*, Manchester, England, St. Jerome Publishing.
- Tymoczko M., 2013: Translation Theory: General Considerations About Theory, In *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, (ed.) Carol A. Chapelle., Blackwell Publishing Ltd. pp. 1-10.