

Translating a Political Discourse: Power of Words

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Abstract:

The present study sheds light on one aspect of literary and non-literary discourse, i.e. a political discourse, written and/or spoken. It argues that the selection of right and proper words for translating a political discourse poses a serious challenge for translators, especially when translating/ interpreting international political events. It uses the translation approach in qualitative research with a view to discussing and analyzing the best way for selecting accurate equivalents in the target language. The study questions are posed to explore difficulties, mistakes and errors occurring in translations/ interpretations so as to be realized, learnt and avoided by translation students and translators in general. Several historical, embarrassing, and humorous examples of deliberate and inadvertent translations and interpretations have been provided to show some of the translation errors and mistakes at the level of articles, demonstratives, terminologies, phrases, etc. The study findings demonstrate that any single task of translation may not be accomplished to perfection. In addition, translation should not be deemed as an entirely mechanical act of reproduction of equivalent words in the target language, but rather as a complex activity carried out with careful selection of meaningful words. The study recommends that translators pay much more attention to the nuances of the selected word meanings to avoid any mistranslation. **Keywords:** word power, translation, interpretation, deliberate, inadvertent literary & non-literary discourse, political discourse

المخلص

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ترجمة الخطاب السياسي: قوة الكلمات

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1- Introduction

Brick by brick, a house can be built; and house by house, great cities are constructed. Likewise, the same thing could be said for words to build up all kinds of writings and their translations. That is to say, word by word a person can write a phrase, which by itself constitutes the first brick in structuring a clause, an essential component of any sentence. Embarking from this point, words, employed by translators to fit a certain context and co-text, are purported to be instrumental in translating most types of literary and non-literary discourses. In fact, discussions and debates on the translation strategies of literary and non-literary works have gone without respite to the effect that some theorists, say, Roman philosophers: Horace and Cicero have laid stress on the establishment of a distinction between word for word and sense for sense translations. The latter type of translation, sense for sense, even counts on the word-selection act. Hence, one can rightly say that whether word for word, sense for sense, or any other translation strategy followed by translators, select words are to be weighed up against the context and co-text, so that the balance of texts of the two respective languages, source and receiving, stays balanced. However, certain circumstances, for various reasons, be it political, religious, or cultural, dictate how translators should act upon the selection of words for their translations. Whereas some of such reasons could be justifiable for the good of translation readership and conveyance of the source text, others are not. Nevertheless, they are intentionally done to achieve certain political or unknown gains whatsoever for the interest of some parties to the detriment of the others. Therefore, specific agendas are set up

in some entities or organizations, such as the United Nations, to follow certain strategies of translation, utilizing the words as a means to an end.

Politics is an umbrella term used in many domestic and international arenas, including business, commerce, economics, and day-to-day life, among others. The more politics becomes internationalized, the more translation becomes more important and required. Explicitly, translation plays a significant role in disseminating considerable knowledge of international events, especially in the field of politics. The act of translation relies on the translator's cognitive and cultural background, experience, and awareness, among other elements, of both source and target texts. These features exert an influence on the translator to select adequate words so as to produce an effective translation of political works both linguistically and culturally. In politics, new terms and expressions do frequently emerge to illustrate political events and changes, so that a smart translator needs to select their equivalents in the target language and translate without losing the meaning. Hence, the problem lies in selecting words right and proper for a political text. Here, the act of translating is a tough task where "the chief difficulties in translating are lexical, not grammatical, i.e. words, collocations and fixed phrases or idioms" (Newmark, 1988, p. 31).

This study attempts to investigate the translators'/ interpreters' selection of words and how their choices might positively or negatively influence the political translation. It tries to answer the following questions: Do the addition and/or omission of single words in the translated texts play a role in achieving political purposes? How do words selected and/or omitted by translators/interpreters put an entirely different construction on the SL text? Do inadvertently acts of selecting inappropriate words and/or omitting certain words while interpreting/ translating give rise to dire consequences? And does it matter for interpreters/ translators to be politically aware of the addressor(s) and addressee(s)?

2- Literature Review

This study sheds light on the power of word selection in the translation process, which has had an impact on the concerned parties throughout history. It merely highlights the deliberate and inadvertent acts of translation, as they may be tagged, of changing and omitting/ adding certain words, only in political discourse

as far as this study is concerned, violating the visibility of the translator. This study is of significance because it attracts the attention of translators, especially the novice ones, to the power of words that may bring about changes to the entire text if not appropriately been selected during the process of translation. There are many previous studies conducted on different aspects of political discourse but none of them focuses on the power of words.

Fatima Zohra Chouarfia (2018) explains the importance of understanding the text and context of the political discourse as well as how the ideology, position and engagement of the translator produce particular effects in translation. She emphasizes some political discourse characteristics and translation strategies including euphemism, repetition, metaphor, and intertextuality as main points for discussion. She gave examples from Obama's Cairo speech delivered at Al-Azhar University, in 2009, which was interpreted simultaneously on Russia Today.

Sakwe George Mbotake (2017) analyzes the lingo-stylistic, rhetorical, and socio-pragmatic features present in the speeches of the Cameroonian political leader. The study assesses the constraints of translating the politician's emotive, emphatic, expressive, ideological, argumentative, and persuasive expressions. The results show that the translation of political discourse is not merely a faithful reproduction of texts but "a deliberate and conscious act of analyzing the specific political situations and processes that determine discourse organization, textual architecture, and design" (p. 364).

Ishraq Al-Zu'bi (2012) presents the difficulties encountered by translators when translating political terms and expressions and suggests the translation strategies used to render them from English into Arabic. She gives a translation test to 40 M.A. students and finds that most students produce inadequate translations and face difficulties due to their unfamiliarity with political expressions/ terms. The study recommends conducting more comprehensive studies "to investigate how other political terms or expressions are translated into Arabic" (p. 75).

It should be noted here that the concepts of equivalence are not discussed in this study as they have been extensively dealt with by a number of renowned scholars such as Schleiermacher's "*Foreignizing and Domesticating*", Nida's

“*Formal and Dynamic*”, Newmark's “*Semantic and Communicative*” and House's “*Overt and Covert*”, among others.

3- Methodology

The data and examples for the present study have been drawn from interpreted/ translated political discourses, including a variety of selected examples from speeches, agreements, statements etc., made by famous political leaders or statesmen. We attempt to analyze some samples of political discourses, highlighting some translational errors and mistakes, and demonstrating how to deal with or avoid the pitfalls present in such political discourses.

4- Deliberate Acts of Translation

In this study, deliberate acts of translation refer to the deliberate change, i.e. adding/omitting some certain words or at times phrases, in the process of translations to communicate something dissimilar to the intended thing expressed by the original text. Under certain circumstances, translators, motivated by either individual drives or hidden powers, tend to violate the ethics of translation to advance some agendas sketched beforehand.

It is, therefore, the power of words that predicts and determines the trend, and may be the future, of any literary or non-literary discourse. So powerful do the words act that people, from all walks of life, consistently use them to change the course of any action. This holds true when it comes to translation, that a translator at several times may make a tough decision as to how to weigh his/ her words to fit the context and co-text of a certain situation, especially in the works that have zero tolerance for inaccuracy and erroneousness.

Related examples are scattered across the literary and non-literary canons throughout human history. Some scholars were executed or burnt alive because of their words; others have been held in high esteem; and others have been in a double-bind, etc. Ranging from political, religious, commercial, administrative, legal, to social texts, etc., the role played by words in the translation process is very vital to the extent that it may lead to catastrophic consequences if not

appropriately selected. Very often, an oversight of even a single word in translation may cause fateful events as in the cases of miscommunication between pilots and air traffic controllers, or profound disagreements such as the case of the definite article "the" in the UN Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967 concerning the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories. Some literary writings, as in novels or dramas, may accommodate deviations inadvertently done by translators. Others, however, may not.

The subtle nuances of the meanings of the selected words, in translation, may spark off controversies between the involved parties, or may result in dire consequences. However, the select words, when translating any political discourse, especially in international organizations such as the United Nations, are subject to the consent of the superpowers. They are used as a means to an end, nothing more. They gain their power when they reverse any situation for the interest of any party. Their selection is a deliberate act to determine the outcome of any process, as has been planned beforehand by the controlling party/ parties. Hence, such a power of the select words is negative, reflecting a poor account of not only the vested interests but also of the translators whose performance in translation have had all the hallmarks of traitors.

The following discussion under this section is grounded on the points propounded by Christina Schäffner's (2007) "Politics and Translation" in *A Companion to Translation Studies* edited by Piotr Kuhiwczak and Karin Littau. Schäffner highlights three perspectives to explain the issue of translation and politics: the politics of translation, the translation of political texts, and the politicization of translation (studies) (p. 136). The politics of translation and the politicization of translation are touched upon in this study due to their relevance to the subject matter at hand.

4.1 Politics of Translation

The politics of translation shapes the translated texts in such a manner that achieves a political decision taken up by the party that monopolizes the situation. It reflects a human activity in powerful emotive terms and deep meanings; hence, translators should understand such political texts and discourses better in order to make an accurate translation and convey the source text message appropriately. A

political discourse exerts a powerful influence on the mind and behavior of the target people. This aspect is best summarized in the following questions:

Who decides which texts get translated, and from and into which languages? Where are the translations produced? Which factors determine the translator's behavior? How are translations received? What is the status of translations, of translating, and of translators in the respective cultures and systems? Who chooses and trains translators? How many? For which language combinations? (Schäffner, 2007, p. 136)

This has been much manifested in translations done from German into Hebrew, reflecting the political trend to change attitudes of the Germans, especially after the Holocaust and World War II. Schäffner (2007) refers to Lefevere (1996) who gives an example of the original text and how it is modified to serve the desired purpose. The original text reads as 'no greater enmity in the world than between Germans and Jews'. It was modified into 'there is no greater enmity in the world than between these Germans and the Jews'. The addition of 'these', preceding the word 'Germans', has a clear indication that only Nazi regime and its henchmen were meant by the rancor towards the Jews. Schäffner points out that the reason conceived by Lefevere for such a modification in the original text is "to avoid any possible offence to the German readership" (2007, p. 137). For, Germans were not all involved in the Nazi atrocities against the Jews, giving rise to a movement of changes and omissions in the translations of German literature into Hebrew to reflect the new attitudes after World War II. Here lies the potential of the power of words in formulating the translation the way its manipulator wants it to be, as has been furnished in the afore-said example of the addition of 'these'. Therefore, words in translation could be angled towards alleviating or aggravating any situation, leading to systematic changes or omissions in the target texts to achieve something politically or whatever is planned.

Words are characterized as being political on the basis of their functional and thematic criteria. That is to say, their use in political texts is determined to achieve various historical and cultural functions, including activities, ideas,

relations etc. related to politics. Political texts are meant for a wider audience and are of many types and structures, depending on lexical choices as well as standard words and phrases. Christina Schäffner (1997) remarks that, "each of the various political (or politically relevant) text types has its own contextual, text-typological, pragmatic, etc. conventions and calls for different translation strategies" (p. 119). Therefore, the translator should pay attention to the relationship between language and translation strategies so as to properly and ideologically demonstrate the underlying meanings that might be invisible in political texts. They have to reflect the meaning of the original text to such a degree that the choice of words in the target text "will produce the same impact on the target-text's audience as the original wording did upon the source-text's audience (Nida, 1964)". However, we should reiterate that translation is not simply the process of replacing words by others in the target language; it needs deep understanding of the political discourse and careful choice of equivalent lexical items.

4.2 Politicization of Translation

In many international organizations such as the United Nations or European Union, the translated texts have been given a label of 'language versions', though they are an act of translations. It could be rightly said that politicizing such translations is common currency in the political activities of the great powers in the world to pass any resolution of their interest. In this context, Schäffner (2007) mentions that "when such texts are put to use for political purposes (i.e. 'the politicization of translation'), the different language versions may give rise to different political interpretations or activities" (p. 145). She gives the example of the resolution 242 of the United Nations Security Council of 1967 concerning the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories. The following are two highlights of the English and French versions of the essential clause of that resolution.

In English, it states 'withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict'.

The French version says '*Retrait des forces armées israéliennes des territoires occupés lors du récent conflit*'.

The reference to the territories as mentioned in the French version— as in the Russian, Spanish and Chinese— is more specific than the English one. For, the omission of the definite article ‘the’, that modifies the word ‘territories’, gives rise to different interpretations. In other words, the deletion of the definite article ‘the’ from the English version and the presence of it ‘des’ in the French version is the difference that provoked controversy between the concerned parties. Some parties have claimed that the omission of ‘the’ is a deliberate act to give a different interpretation of the resolution in question, giving Israel the right to keep some occupied territories under its control. Conversely, the others’ argument runs as follows: the use of the French article ‘des’ is a result of a translation error that should be ignored. Yet, by viewing the then recognized and working languages of the United Nations— French, Russian, Spanish and Chinese, including the Arabic version distributed to Arab delegates, one can notice the presence of the definite article in all these languages. And, on this point, the question that needs to be answered is was the definite article written first in English and omitted thereof after being distributed for translation? Such instances could be regarded as another example of the power of word selection and how certain words may change any situation for or against any party. Here we get the answer to the first question of the study.

A similar example is found in the treaty signed in 1840 between the British government, which desired to secure its sovereignty over New Zealand, and the Māori chiefs, who were seeking protection from the marauding gangs. The treaty was drafted in English and hastily translated into Māori overnight. The English version reads:

Māori cede the sovereignty of New Zealand to Britain;
Māori give the Crown an exclusive right to buy lands
they wish to sell, and, in return, are guaranteed full
rights of ownership of their lands, forests, fisheries and
other possessions; and Māori are given the rights and
privileges of British subjects. New Zealand History
(n.d.)

The Māori version was not an exact translation of the English, where the above article; for instance, was translated with a different meaning that the Māori

settlers were not to give up sovereignty, which was mistranslated as 'kawanatanga' (governance). They took the view that they were getting a legal system by giving the Queen complete government over their land while retaining the right to rule themselves. Many differences and errors in mistranslating the Treaty have been subjects of debates for a long time.

Another related example of how words may result in a different interpretation of the original text lies in the translation of the elected Egyptian President Morsi's speech, at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran. The different interpretation of President Morsi's speech that was rendered by the Farsi translator went viral on media and non-media outlets, featuring the potentiality of how words in translation may turn things upside down. His speech sounded critical of the Bahraini regime, which the President did not incline to lambast. As opposed to President Morsi's expectation and/or the audience, the Farsi translator swapped the word 'Syrian' for the word 'Bahraini'. President Morsi said in Arabic: < إن تضامننا مع نضال أبناء سوريا الحبيبة ضد نظام قمعي فقد شرعيته واجب أخلاقي بمثل ما >, which means in English, "Our solidarity with the struggle of the Syrian people against an oppressive regime that has lost its legitimacy is an ethical duty, as it is a political and strategic necessity". Here, the deliberately wrong translation made the audience think that President Morsi was attacking the Bahraini regime. The word 'Syrian' was deliberately replaced by 'Bahraini' for advancing some political agendas. Consequently, a wave of controversy flared up between Bahrain, Egypt and Iran over such a sensitive matter. Obviously, Shi'ite-majority Iran, being a sympathizer and a supporter of Shi'ite-offshoot, Alawite minority ruling over Syria, and the Shi'ites who are in the majority in Bahrain under the rule of Al Khalifa family, plotted such a deliberate act of translation. In fact, the replacement of the word 'Syria' with the word 'Bahrain' has not occurred once, but at least thrice as read in media outlets, proving the argument that a word may change the course of any action for or against any party.

"Morsy's Words Changed in Farsi Translation" is the title of a news article on the afore-said incident by an Egyptian-based newspaper in English, Daily News (2012). This article sheds light on how the translator managed by virtue of the deliberate act of translation to change the situation for one against another

party. President Morsy, former President of Egypt, openly indicated that those who are struggling for freedom are the “Palestinians and Syrians”. However, the translation replaced the word “Syrians” with “Bahrainis” for political reasons. The two examples of Māori’s treaty and Morsi’s speech give an answer to the second question of the study.

5- Inadvertent Acts of Translation

Unlike the deliberate act of translation, inadvertent acts of translation mean herein the inadvertent change, addition, and/or omission of certain words, and sometimes phrases, in the process of translation. However, such an act has significant impacts on the course of action or at least it shall be oft-quoted for discussing problems and issues arising from the process of translation. It may cause an embarrassing situation for the speaker, who may not apparently take it in stride, and the translator whose career may be jeopardized because of a gaffe in translation, as well. There are many examples of the inadvertent act of translation that might cause embarrassment, laughter, catastrophic consequences etc. The following examples give an answer to the third question of the study. The first example could be taken from the visit of the U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, to Poland in December 1977. Due to the lack of interpreters for Polish in the U.S. State Department, they hired a freelance translator, Russian-English, Steven Seymour who was Polish by birth, but not a Polish interpreter by trade. Attributing his deficiency in translating the U.S. President’s prepared speech to many pivotal factors, among other things, the late receipt of that speech by the interpreter, only a couple of minutes in lieu of hours ahead of time, S. Seymour, normally, was bound to fall short of the translation quality, and to likely be faux pas-prone. This is what happened to S. Seymour who has committed an inadvertent act of translation, by selecting (a) word/s unfit for the situation. While translating it into Polish, Seymour inadvertently replaced the word ‘left’ by ‘abandoned’, in “when I left the United States”.

Another example, as quoted from the article published by the New York Times on January 11, 1978, entitled “Lost in Translation” is “For Mr. Carter's reference to the Polish people's “desires for the future,” Mr. Seymour offered “lusts”. The word ‘lusts’ is “a sexually laden and particularly uncharacteristic

expression for a president who was known for his deeply held religious convictions” (Kelly and Zetzsche, 2012). The above-mentioned two examples, among other similar ones, of the rendition of President Carter’s words into Polish during his visit to Poland indicate clearly that words in translation could be catastrophic for the involved parties. Such inadvertent acts of translation may set the stage for third parties to have a field day, as the Polish press had done with such an event, and so did the U.S. media.

In much the same vein, Kelly and Zetzsche (2012) have referred to Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State. In 2009, Hillary Clinton gifted her Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov a button, symbolizing a ‘resetting’ of the relationship between the United States of America and Russia. “However, instead of bearing the term “reset” (*perezagruzka*), the gift was labeled with the word *peregruzka*, which means “overloaded” or “overcharged”. It could have caused controversy between both nations, had not the two diplomats understood the inadvertent act of translation. Hence, both diplomats, Clinton and Lavrov, ended up laughing at such mistranslation.

Beninatto and Kelly (2009) stated another related example of how an inadvertent act of translation could change the course of action. On February 24th, 2009, “a single word in a speech by Hungarian Prime Minister was mistranslated, influencing the valuation of local currency and causing the Hungarian forint to dip to a record low against the euro” (Kelly and Beninatto, 2009). Words, after all, are the hidden power that make any situation upside down, or set them straight for the betterment of the concerned parties.

Interpretation is a challenging profession and can lead to many embarrassing misunderstandings and humorous lost-in-translation moments. This is evident in the following example that a Spanish delegate was subject to a really funny interpretation mistake when meeting with the French. The Spanish delegate Holmes told the audience, “Please excuse me, I have a cold”. But, the distracted French interpreter mistranslated his words as, “Excuse me, I’m constipated” cited in (Avo Translations, 2019). This was a tricky problem for the interpreter, leading the French delegation to burst into laughter about which Holmes felt confused. Having been informed of the mistake, Holmes helplessly joined in the hysterical laughter.

Away from laughter which dies upon coinciding with misinterpretation that might pose threats of nuclear war. This is noted in the speech of the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who was seen by the superpowers as a threatening figure. While addressing Western ambassadors at the Polish embassy in Moscow, Khrushchev accurately said, "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will attend your funeral". But, Khrushchev's personal interpreter Viktor Sukhodrev missed the nuance of the last sentence and interpreted it as "we will bury you", which was widely quoted as a nuclear threat in Western press. These words changed the message and contained a serious mistake that cannot be ignored since translation "deals with how to bring the same message from one language and to make these messages into the same meaning in other language" (Rahmatillah, 2013, p. 14).

Similarly, the worst translation mistake in history, as classified by the US National Security Agency, comes as a result of a huge error in translating from Japanese into English, causing the Americans to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In 1945, the then Japanese Prime Minister, Kantaro Suzuki, received a harshly-worded declaration of unconditional surrender terms from the allied countries, including that any negative answer from Japan would invite "prompt and utter destruction". Suzuki made a choice of a strong word '*Mokusatsu*', meaning "withholding comment", "refrained from comments at the moment", or "give it the silent treatment". He used '*Mokusatsu*' as the key word to express his idea, a word derived from the Japanese term for 'silence' that can be interpreted in several different ways. According to Kumiko Torikai, "Hasegawa Saiji of Domei Press, who allegedly translated '*Mokusatsu*' as 'ignore', remarked unofficially ... that he should have translated '*Mokusatsu*' as "no comment" but that nobody in Japan at that time knew the expression" (2009, p. 34). Yet, the term may be ambiguous but this translation error caused instantaneous death to more than 70,000 people and some 100,000 as a result of the destruction and radiation. Torikai added that, "it was indeed unfortunate that the particular word was selected for domestic reasons ... there was lack of understanding about the importance of the role of translation, with its possibilities as well as its limits" (2009, p. 36).

These are examples of direct interpretation where interpreters are fully aware of the addressor(s) and addressee(s). Selection of accurate and proper words in such events presents a real challenge to interpreters who have to make decisions as quickly as they can. On the other hand, translators of text-based documents and previously or would-be delivered speeches have a space of a wide word choice. Generally speaking, they must be knowledgeable of the text at hand as well as the sender and the receiver in order to produce an accurate translation. According to Nord, "if translators cannot imagine who is addressing whom and for what purpose, they will cling to the source-text surface structures for fear of missing the goal of translating" (1997, p. 74). Here we have the answer to the last question of the study that translators should have some relevant knowledge, particularly in the political field, of the addressor(s) and addressee(s).

6- Conclusion

It is axiomatic that mistakes, be it semantic, grammatical or whatsoever, are inevitable in translations. And, translators can never ever accomplish a single task of translation to perfection. For, translation, as oft said, is an unfinished job. Translators go all out to produce translations of high quality, trying their level best to overcome any challenge in the translating process. The power of the selected words comes into play when doing translations, especially in sensitive circumstances or in works that have zero tolerance for any inaccuracy. Most of the novice translators and sometimes professional ones still encounter challenges of selecting words that properly fit in the target texts. Thus, translation should not be considered as a merely mechanical process of simply looking the words up in a dictionary and linking them grammatically with others in the target text, but as a complex activity, carried out with careful selection of meaningful words.

Translators, falling under the category of ‘Deliberate Acts of Translation’, as has been discussed earlier, are no longer translators, but TRAITORS, though they might be coerced into doing so. By violating the ethics of translation, serving the interest of one party over another, they turn out to be, having the Italian notion in view “*traduttore, traditore*”, traitors. They could be translators in one situation,

but traitors in a different situation. Therefore, the power of the selected words defines the title of a person who translates any discourse as a translator or a traitor.

Inadvertent acts of translation as has been investigated above may be taken in stride by the affected party or may, as the deliberate acts of translation, have dire consequences as the mistranslation of a single word in the speech of the Hungarian Prime Minister. Therefore, translators are advised to pay much more attention to the nuances of meanings of words to avoid any inadvertent act of translation. They are, further, advised to decline any offer to render any translation if they have not enough time ahead of the required task. After all, they are not to blame for any inappropriate rendition if it is done impromptu. However, they are to be labeled ‘traitors’, as those who commit deliberate acts of translation. Finally, translation students and translators in the field should master the skills and rules of political discourse in both source and target language communication and have considerable knowledge of cultural, social, historical, and ideological awareness when making their choices of accurately equivalent words. They can benefit from the foregoing discussions and examples and know how to professionally deal with such situations whenever they come across similar political texts.

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