'The Translator's Dilemma'
Implicatures and The role of the translator

By:

Antar Solhy Abdellah *

M A L inguistics and translation Theory
SOAS, U niversity of L ondon.

* Antar Abdellah is an assistant lecturer in Qena school of Education, South Valley University, Egypt. He got his MA degree in Theoretical Linguistics and translation theory from the school of Oriental and African studies, university of London. He is currently training prospective teachers of English as a foreign language on basic translation skills as part of his PhD study in translation pedagogy. He participated in some international conferences on translation and is interested in the application of translation theories in translation teaching. Mr. Abdellah can be reached at: antar20@maktoob.com
Understanding utterances is not simply a matter of knowing the meanings of the words uttered and the way in which they are combined. It also involves drawing inferences on the basis of non-linguistic information and the assumption that the speaker has aimed to meet certain general standards of communication. In this article, we discuss the question of writer-reader, translator-reader problem of proper communication, and investigate the concept of faithfulness in translation and its manifestations in a loyalty to the original text as well as a loyalty to the target audience and the prospective readers of the translation. To reach an understanding of this dilemma and suggest solutions to it, an extract from Othello is examined along with as translation in Arabic.

Proper communication is assumed to take place in a situation where a writer, or a speaker, transmits a message, via a channel- writing or speaking- to a reader or a hearer. If the hearer or reader gets the messages the same way as the speaker/ writer had in mind, then there is proper communication. However the quality of the message, the channels through which the message is conveyed and other situational factors may lead to a distortion of the message in the minds of the readers/ hearers. The problem is more complicated when applied on translation in which a reader (translator) is asked to read and understand the message of a writer, and at the same time, or afterwards, transmits what s/he understood of this message to another audience who may be totally different from the readership the original writer had in mind.

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:84) defines a senseless or non-sensical text as “one in which text receivers can discover no continuity (of senses), usually because there is a serious mismatch between the configuration of concepts and relations expressed and the receivers’ prior knowledge of the world”. The complexity of the work of the translator, as Abdellah (2002) points out, arises from the fact that misconception or misinterpretation in the reading comprehension stage will surely lead to deviant and disfigured representations of the original in the minds of the target readers. In this article, the problem of standards of communication between translators-readers and its relationship with shifts in coherence will be discussed.

Blum-Kulka (1986: 304) understands coherence as “the realization(s) of the text’s meaning potential”. She assumes that texts may “lose their meaning potential through translation” and differentiates between two types of shifts in coherence: text-focused and reader-focused. Writers may have certain types of readers in mind when they write their pieces, and accordingly- especially in literature- they may sometimes seek to make their message ambiguous or complicated in order to convey certain implications and create certain impressions. It is reported that Chekhov confessed “not once had either one (the directors of his plays) read through my play carefully” (Bristow 1977, my bracketing). In doing so, writers are consciously violating Grice’s(1975) cooperative principle and its maxims. The cooperative principle states that one’s conversational, or otherwise, contribution should be “such as required” (1975:45). Derived from this general principle are the maxims of Quantity, quality, relevance, and Manner. Baker (1996:238) concludes that “these maxims are not

---

1The **maxim of Quality**: Try to make your contribution one which is true, specifically:

i. do not say what you believe to be false

ii. do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

The **maxim of Quantity**

i. make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

ii. do not make your contribution more informative than required
universals”, however, “the interpretation of a maxim or the maxims themselves may differ from
linguistic community to another.” What can be a universal is the “the phenomenon of implicature”
which refers to “what the speaker means or implies rather than what s/he literally says.” (223).

Each language has a preference for a coherent device which is mainly used to convey
meanings and impressions that are not literally stated in the text. These devices are not necessarily the
same in both the target and source languages. The duty of the translator in this case is multifold; first
s/he needs to read and comprehend what the source text says literally, then figure out what is implied
by certain expressions or stylistic devices- such as dramatic questions, lexical repetition, word
order,...- only to start a new process which is mainly transmitting the literal as well as the implied
meanings in the target language using the devices that are preferred by this latter language rather than
the source one. In doing so, a translator has a licesense to reword , add , omit, provide a footnote, or
an introductory sentence or rephrase certain pieces in order to convey the sense that the original
writer wanted to show.

Grice (1975) lists some factors that contribute to the success or failure in working out
implicatures. These include the cooperative principle – which is equivalent to Blum-Kulka’s
“explicitation hypothesis”- and its maxims, context, background knowledge , and the availability of
all these to writer and reader. Enkvist (1985) distinguishes three levels of inferences that help in
understanding messages and achieving successful communication: the intertextual level which is
centered around the text , the illocutionary level which is centered around the situation, and the
interactional level which is centered around the receiver’s judgment.2

In the following extract from Shakespeare’s Othello, Iago deliberately violates Grice’s
maxims, certainly the maxim of relevance, in order to convey certain implicatures. Othello recognizes
the violations and tries to get Iago to spell out what he means.

IAGO My noble lord--
OTHELLO What dost thou say, Iago?
IAGO Did Michael Cassio, when you woo’d my lady,
Know of your love?
OTHELLO He did, from first to last: why dost thou ask?
IAGO But for a satisfaction of my thought; No further harm.
OTHELLO Why of thy thought, Iago?
IAGO I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

The maxim of Relevance: make your contributions relevant.
The maxim of Manner: be perspicuous, and specifically:
i. avoid obscurity (eschew obfuscation)
ii. avoid ambiguity
iii. be brief
iv. be orderly

2 In The Intertextual level: we fill in gaps in the universe of the text to reconstruct the world described in the text.
In The illocutionary level: we draw inferences from the form and situational context of an utterance to see whether it is to
be taken literally or interpreted as an indirect speech act or as irony.
In The Interactional level: we draw conclusions about the speaker/author’s politeness, attitudes, mental state, abilities,
ethical and moral status and the like.” (Enkvist, 1985: 241)
**OTHELLO** O, yes; and went between us very oft.

**IAGO** Indeed!

**OTHELLO** Indeed! ay, indeed: discern'st thou aught in that? Is he not honest?

**IAGO** Honest, my lord!

**OTHELLO** Honest! ay, honest.

**IAGO** My lord, for aught I know.

**OTHELLO** What dost thou think?

**IAGO** Think, my lord!

**OTHELLO** Think, my lord!

By heaven, he echoes me,
As if there were some monster in his thought
Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something:
I heard thee say even now, thou likedst not that,
When Cassio left my wife: what didst not like?
And when I told thee he was of my counsel
In my whole course of wooing, thou criedst 'Indeed!'
And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit: if thou dost love me,
Show me thy thought

In this scene, Iago tries to lead Othello to think of Cassio- Othello’s best friend- and Desdemona- Othello’s loving wife- as having a dishonored relationship. Iago recognizes well that it would be very harsh and far-fetched for Othello to believe of such relationship between his dear ones. Thus Iago violates most of Grices maxims in order to convey this message to Othello. In doing so, Iago has two objects; first to say what he wants in the form of an advice given by a friend, and second to sow the seeds of doubt in Othello’s heart and, by doing so, takes revenge for his failed aspiration as to be a leader of the army.

Iago first violates the maxim of quantity when Othello asks “why dost thou ask?” and he doesn’t give the reason for his query rather he uses two expressions that are less informative, but at the same time overloaded with implicatures: “for a satisfaction of my thought “ – a thought which he does not make explicit for Othello, and “no further harm” which implies that there is at least some harm. By giving these two introductory expressions, Iago succeeds in attracting the attention of Othello and of planting the first seeds of suspense and expectation. In violating the maxim of quantity, Iago did also violate the maxim of manner in that he is not avoiding obscurity of expression.

Then he consciously violates the maxim of relevance by repeating Othello’s words in the form of exclamatory questions rather than providing him with answers. When Othello asks “is he not honest?” Iago answers by using two techniques of maxim violation: first he repeats the word “honest”, in stead of providing new information, and second he repeats it in the form of a denying question. So in fact he is providing an answer, but it is more implied than explicitly stated. However for a passionate person like Othello the answer is still ambiguous- thus Iago is also violating the maxim of manner. The same techniques are used again when the Lord asks him “what dost thou think?”. Iago does not have evidence – and he does not care about providing one- for his denying intonation when implying that Cassio is not honest. In this sense, Iago is still violating the maxim of quality.
These violations for the cooperative principle and its maxims are carefully planned to pave the way for Iago’s implicatures to Othello. By this time, Iago’s techniques succeed in deriving Othello out of his calmness and leading him to beg Iago to unfold what he hides and fears to show. Thus these violations do not distort coherence, on the contrary they provide rich linguistic and non-linguistic information in order to meet a certain standard of communication between the two partners.

The problem now for the translator is how to convey these implicatures into another language that may use very different linguistic and non-linguistic devices for conveying the same meaning. Even if the two languages use the same devices, I don’t think that they will be applied to the same parts of speech as the source language. Let’s have a look at how this text can be translated into Arabic and how these implicatures are conveyed in the Arabic language. The different devices used in Arabic are underlined in the back translation.

Back translation from Arabic:
Iago: my noble lord-

Otho: what’s the matter with you Iago?
Iago: I was wondering whether Cassio had knowledge of your love for my queen while you were wooing her?
Otho: yes, he knew of it from the beginning to the end. But why do you ask?
Iago: only to make sure of a thought that came to my mind. But don’t worry about that.
Otho: Don’t worry? What is this thought, Iago?
Iago: Nothing, only I didn’t think he knew her.
Otho: He was even the messenger between us.
Iago: Oh, is it true? (Is what you say is true?)
Otho: Is it true? Yes, it is true; why do you feel surprised? Is he not honest?
Iago: Do you say “honest”, my lord?
Otho: yes. Is he not honest?

3 My translation.
Original text in Arabic:
Iago: Not as far as I know.
Otho: then by God, tell me what you know.
Iago: Do you ask me my opinion, my Lord?
Otho: “do you ask, my lord?”, by God, you are repeating my words as if there is a devil in your head that refuses to show itself. You imply (mean) something, Iago. I even think that a minute ago I heard you murmur something that uncovers your dissatisfaction when Cassio left my wife. So what is this that dissatisfies you? And when I told you that he was my messenger while I was wooing her, you cried- with your brows crocked above your eyes- “is it true?” I take oath that you uncover the veil away from what is in your mind, which I believe to be horrible- if indeed you love me.

A first look at the Arabic translation shows the very different devices, or place of devices, used for conveying the message Shakespeare wanted to convey through Iago’s speech to Othello. Here Othello takes part in the repetition mode used by Iago in the English text. This is a normal device used in Arabic that the person who has doubts in his mind and heart tends to repeat lexical items in order to reorganize his thoughts or relieve his worries. Also, it is common in Arabic to say “nothing, don’t worry” when there is indeed “something to worry about”. So while Iago in the original English text declares “no further harm” which implies that there is a degree of “harm” any way, the Arabic version uses an equivalent expression that means there is something to worry about.

The Arabic version moreover tends to explain the one-word-question technique used by Iago by mentioning plainly the complete sentences. So instead of just “honest?” , the Arabic goes “Do you say “honest” my Lord?” The English version implies that Iago is uncertain about the honesty of Cassio, the Arabic however has a shift of coherence as it implies this and another thing, that Iago is uncertain about the question asked by Othello. However this shift of coherence is in itself a technique used by the Arab translator to show that Iago is pretending he cannot hear the question in order to derive the lord to more doubts and suspensions. If the play is however acted on the stage, some of the Arabic version devices can be left since intonation and facial expressions in this case would form the nonlinguistic factors that help in transmitting the implicatures Iago is trying to make.

It is also worth noticing that the verb “think” has been substituted by the Arabic “know” which implies more certainty of Cassio’s dishonesty. In a last attempt to draw the atmosphere of suspense and doubt the Arabic translator adds to Othello’s “I heard thee say even now, thou lik’st not that” what explains to the Arab reader how this slight hint accelerates Iago’s plan. The English text states that Othello heard Iago say that he “didn’t like that”, that Othello didn’t care for this until Iago sowed in his heart the seeds of doubt, only then he recalled this sentence and asked for clarification. The Arabic version however, states that Othello heard Iago murmur some words without mentioning the exact words as in the original, but rather by adding a description for this murmur which expresses dissatisfaction. By doing this the Arabic version enhances the sense of doubt by making implicit what is explicit in the original which is a device used in Arabic for raising suspense especially when referring to murmuring.

To sum up, in the above example, we have looked at a case of violation of Grice’s maxims for the sake of deeper implicatures and how the translator favored his loyalty to the reader to his loyalty to the text when transmitting the implications into Arabic. We conclude with Baker’s warning that
“translators should be careful not to ‘overdo’ things by explaining too much and leaving the reader with nothing to do.” (1996: 254)

Bibliography


* Word count: 2044 words excluding footnotes, title, opening quotation, bibliography and data (Othello original text).