THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract

Translation, which involves the transfer of meaning from one language to another, is a complex process. Certain variables influence this transfer of meaning: time, place, text and socio-cultural knowledge of both the source and target audience. These variables sum up the context. Consequently, there is linguistic and social context. Every language has a peculiar way of expression. Some expressions acquire different meanings in different contexts; some also have connotative and denotative meanings. Also in this era of globalization, there are constant shifts in contextual meaning of words and expressions. For a translator to transfer this meaning, the linguistic and extra linguistic aspects of both languages are imperative for understanding. Through translation the meaning of a word, text or an expression is given in the context in which it occurs: a kind of symbiotic situation. In this work, we try to buttress the importance of context in translation by citing copious examples of some expressions, words, and slang which cut across different domains of study.

Key Words:, context, connotative, culture, denotative, language, meaning and translation

Introduction

Language is not static. It changes over space and time. This change accounts for new words, expressions and coinages into the lexicon of a language. What a word means today may not be the meaning tomorrow or might not have been the original meaning. Each language has its peculiar way of expressions depending on their historical background. Language is not just about communication, it has to do with social, political and cultural aspects of the users. According to Bellos (2011, p. 159), "language is the exclusive attribute of humans and cannot be isolated from the social context in which it is embedded". This implies that the translator has to look into the background of the text to understand the text. Two of the key determinants of how utterance conveys meaning (and of the meaning that it effectively conveys) are these: the situation in which it is uttered, (the time, the place and knowledge of the practices that are conventionally performed by people present in such a time and place), and the

identities of the participants, together with the relationship between them. (Bellos, p. 72). This paper presents the role of context in translation.

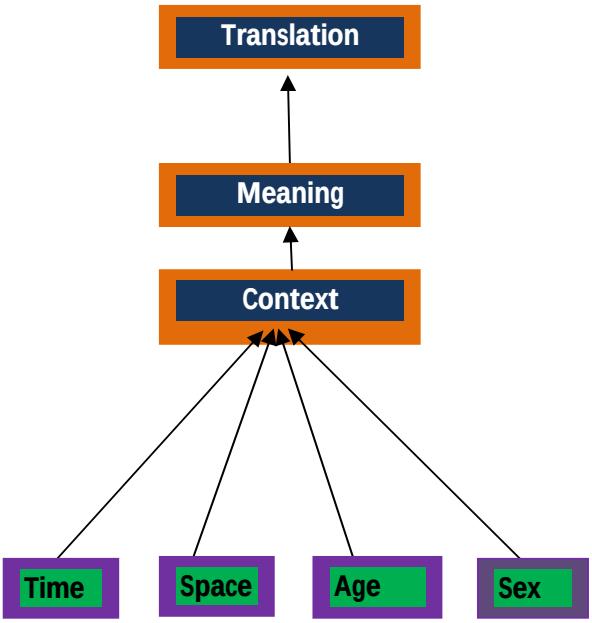
1. Definition of terms

1.1. Translation

Translation as we have already noted, is the transfer of message from one language to another. Pratima (2012, p. 10), opines that, "the most important aspect of this message is its inherent meaning". Translation is understood as, "an act of carrying the meaning of a text from one language to another. This process involves interpretation of meaning of the source text and producing the same meaning in another language". (http:/www.onehourtranslation.com). Nida (1966, p. 11) is of the opinion that "translation consists of producing in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly with respect to meaning and secondly with respect to style". House (1977, p. 31) defines translation as "the replacement of a text in the source language text by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent text in the target language". Languages are governed by the linguistic and social norms of their societies and these help in the understanding of the inner core of the meaning. The translator should take cognizance of this.

1.2 Context

Context can be defined as the entire environment in which a word or sentence is expressed or stated. No sentence/word in isolation contains all information the translator needs to translate. The information he needs is got from the context. The concept of context proposed by Halliday cited in Hu (2010, p. 324) consists of "three strata: context of culture, context of situation and co-text (linguistic text)". For Jiang (2006, p. 2), "there is always a context in which translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed". Context is influenced by some factors: time, space, age and sex. It is better represented by the diagram below.



1.3 Meaning

Meaning falls under the aspect of linguistics known as semantics. Its knowledge is a great asset to the translator. Meaning therefore is language specific and it is conditioned by contextual relevance. Depending on what language you are translating, the same language may translate differently, between countries, as words may convey different meanings depending on the location that they are used. Different words give different meanings when used in different contexts. This leads to pragmatics which is the study of the contextual meaning. Since in translation, meaning is of overriding importance, it follows that the cultural frame of reference cannot be ignored. (House, 2009, p. 12). Meaning is not always carried by the linguistic signs; but also by the cultural signs and symbols. (Pratima, p. 41).

2. Presentation of data

2.1 Words

Some source languages may be semantically complex. Words are used in diverse contexts; they have different meanings and level of significance between different cultures, regions, social and age groups. For example the word 'head', cannot be translated as a word into any other language. Head is a single word with a range of transferred and figurative meanings: part of the body, head of state, head of an

organization, head cook etc. The meaning it has in a particular usage can easily be represented in another language. Also in case of 'murder', Bellos (p. 225) observes that "what it means when you use it in an English sentence may be first degree, second degree, manslaughter, homicide or even collateral damage in a legal description of the event". Languages also differ at the level of words. The same word 'murder' irrespective of the type is translated into Igbo as *igbu ọchụ.* The word 'chick' is used for a young hen, but teenagers use it for young girls/women. Some other examples are shown in the data below.

Words	Meanings
Head	Part of the body, leader, chief, boss, principal etc
Murder	First degree, second degree, homicide, manslaughter, genocide, assassination etc.
Landslide	Majority , natural disaster
Tsunami*	Natural disaster, intense crisis (economic or political)
Steal	Theft, robbery, pilfer, larceny burglary, pickpocket.
Brown	Coffee, chocolate,

From the examples above, translating the words in isolation surely would lead to mistranslation. Baker (p. 17) posits that "...in the majority of cases, words have 'blurred edges', their meanings are, to a large extent, negotiable and are realized in specific context". Words are not independent signs, they have associations and connotations. Translation is not the transfer of words from one language to another; it is the transfer of meaning from one language to another. Through translation, the meaning of a word is given in the context in which it occurs. According to Bellos (2011, p. 86) "translation is in fact a very handy way of solving the conundrums of words and meanings...But what you can say by means of translation is what the word means in the context in which it occurs".

2.2 Expressions and Phrases

In this era of globalization, expressions and modern phrases are introduced into many languages of the world as a result of politics, terrorism, conflict, global economy and natural disasters etc. Some of these expressions and phrases may take on different meanings from the original meanings. Here are some examples culled from Ijioma (2016, p. 18-21).

EXPRESSIONS/PHRASES	Central Meaning	Extension meaning
Being in coma	Coma is the state of one who is critically ill. The person may die or be resuscitated.	PDP is in coma.
Diarrhoea of the mouth	Diarrhoea is also a medical condition whereby one has frequent and watery bowel movements.	Segun is suffering from diarrhoea of the mouth.
A jaundiced eye	someone suffering from jaundice	Look with prejudice
Political menopause	Menopause is known as the ending of menstruation /fertility in women.	Chief Obi is suffering from political menopause.
Socio-economic dislocation	Dislocation is generally referred to a joint being out of place. It has so many other connotations.	Nigeria is suffering from socio-economic dislocation.
Tsunami/Tsunamic-like proportion	Tsunami was a natural disaster in the United States of America.	AIDS is spreading with tsunami-like proportion.

It is evident that the above expressions are dependent on context, situation and place. Nida (2001, p.), on the importance of context stresses that 'contexts in translating combines elements of contextual analysis with areas such as culture and language'. The political scenario in Nigeria and war of words in our polity gave rise to some of these expressions. Some other countries may have their own expressions different form these depending on what obtains in their own situation and their cultural affinity. Even the same person may say the same thing differently at other times. This implies that translations are never produced in a cultural or political vacuum and cannot be isolated from the context in which the texts are embedded.

2.3 Idioms and Proverbs

Idioms and proverbs often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. (Baker, 1992, p. 63). Proverbs and idioms are culture-specific. Symbols used in proverbs and idioms reflect the world, environment, time and age of the users due to cultural differences. Translation, language and culture closely knit, and to transfer the meaning of proverbs, the culture of both the source and target languages is of utmost importance. Since in translation meaning is of overriding importance, it follows that the cultural frame of reference cannot be ignored. The Igbo proverb, *anaghị agbaa aka ahụ nwata eze,* (literally means 'you can not see a child's teeth empty handed'. A translator cannot get the meaning without the historical background of the Igbo people. Translation is about what people mean by the language pragmatically. In the traditional Igbo society as observed by Eke and Ugorji (1999, p. 44), "the first tooth produced by a baby is celebrated with pomp. Anyone who has the good luck of seeing it first is normally constrained by culture to make a present to the baby, hence the proverb. Some idioms and proverbs have denotative and connotative meanings. There are some that have different meanings depending on the circumstances they are used. This buttresses the fact that, no word, expressions, idioms, proverbs, metaphors and indeed any utterance should be translated out of context.

Below are some examples, also culled from Ijioma (2016, p. 18-21)

Proverbs/Idioms	Denotative meaning	Connotative Meaning
A jaundiced eye	Someone suffering from jaundice	Look with prejudice
Line one's pocket	Put lining while sowing a cloth	Make money dishonestly
Kick in the teeth	Hit someone's teeth with the feet	Great setback
Workhouse	A place where work is done	A dependable person or machine
Wool-gathering	To harvest wool from the farm	Absent minded

We have already mentioned that translation cannot be divulged from culture. Language is culturally embedded and can only be understood when considered together with the cultural context in which its linguistic items are used. (Ijioma, 2014, p. 47- 48).

2.4 Abbreviations/Acronyms

The use of abbreviations and acronyms is becoming more and more frequent in every language, especially in some fields, such as medicine, information technology, finance, commerce television and radio commercials etc. Technical translations usually involve a lot of abbreviations and acronyms which are different in every language and these cannot be translated literally. In translating abbreviations, a translator not only considers the linguistic aspects but also the extra linguistic aspects. There are equally abbreviations and acronyms that are the same but have different meanings in different languages, domains, and at times in the same domain.

Abr./Acr.	MEANINGS
AD	Anno Domini, Atopic Dermatitis
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, Army Induced Divorce Syndrome
ATM	Automatic Teller Machine, Attempted Murder /At the Moment (sms)
CA	Continuous Assessment, Cost Analysis, Cardiac Arrest etc.
CAN	Christian Association of Nigeria, Counselling Association of Nigeria
CB	Circuit Breaker, Central Battery, Control Box, Chronic Bronchitis etc.
OP	Out Patient, Original Pack, Off Point etc.
LAN	Linguistic Association of Nigeria, Local Area Network
LOC	Local Organizing Committee, Loss of Consciousness
MD	Managing Director, Muscular Dystrophy
NBA	Nigeria Bar Association, National Basketball Association
NDA	Nigerian Defence Academy, Niger Delta Avengers
TR	Total Revenue, Technical Report, Tax Return, Technical Review, Tape Recorder etc.

The above table on abbreviations and acronyms shows the importance of context. Some belong to the same domain, for example, **CR:** *Circuit Breaker, Central Battery, Control Box;* (electrical), *Total Revenue, Tax Return;* (commerce). These cannot be translated out of context. Some abbreviations belong entirely to different domains; **LAN:** *Linguistic Association of Nigeria, Local Area Network;* **NDA:** *Nigerian Defence Academy, Niger Delta Avengers.* The last two have opposing functions, while the first is for security; the later is a militant group. Without identifying the context, the translator will transfer the wrong meaning which may be disastrous.

2.5 Slang

Slang serves as a linguistic variant that is group-marked. According to Eble (1996, p. 12-24), "one of the main features of slang is that it serves as a linguistic variant that is group- marked. The usage of slang as a group language indicates demarcation, defiance to the standard and at the same time works as a group cohesive force". Mattiello (2007, p. 125) buttressing this point opines that, "slang introduces new words into the lexicon and, interestingly, it re-uses existing words giving them novel meanings and functions that depart from ordinary ones". Slang is even more complicated by the question of context. It is normally used to suit a pragmatic context and serve specific functions such as identifying oneself with a group. Sornig (1981, p. 21), observes that

> *Slang semantics is a kind of secondary semiotics which is motivated by the wish to distinguish itself from the 'ordinary' use of words and consequently might be interpreted from both its semantic distance from its object and from the 'ordinary' semantic function of a certain word.*

The examples given below are cited from Osuagwu (2009, p. 31-42).

Slang	General Meaning	Slang Meanings
ATM	Automatic Teller Machine, Attempted Murder	A rich man
Arsenal	An European Football Team	Big buttocks
Banana	Fruit	Penis
Bang	Strike upon an object/A sudden percussive noise etc.	To make love
Burnt Offering	Biblical Word	Burnt Food
Close-up	A brand of tooth paste	A person who smiles too much
Cucumber	Vegetable	Penis
Fish Brain	Anatomy of fish	Dull Student
HOD	Head of Department	Someone with a big head
Manchester	A football Team in Europe	A girl with big boobs
NFA	Nigeria Football Association	No Future Ambition
White House	State House for American Presidents	Toilet

The above slang expressions are used by undergraduate students to preserve their secrecy and ward off their teachers from grasping what they are saying by using standard words in different contexts. Matiello (p. 130) observes that, "young people generally use creative innovative slang to slow their belonging to a group and establish solidarity with the other group members, keeping the older generation at a distance". Slang is also located below the language level that is stylistically neutral and ranges from colloquial to vulgar to obscene. (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990). From the above examples, it is observed that, what is slang for one person, generation or situation may not be slang for another and slang expressions can originate from any domain of study. Slang, therefore, is built around context. According to Matiello (p. 126), "slang term includes a vast area of extra-socio pragmatic meanings, which depart

from the ordinary ones and rather belong to a restricted community of members sharing context experience and mutual knowledge".

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the role of context in translation in the different domains. There is a close interdependent relationship between language and context. For a translator to convey meaning from one language to another, he has to analyse the surface and deep structure of the language. Culture, we know cannot be separated from language. The cultural aspect and of course the cultural context is also of utmost importance. Newmark (1991, p. 73), opines that "...the translator has to turn to cultural context, since what is relevant to translation is not only situational context but also cultural context". We have equally noted that translation is meaning and meaning is context. This meaning changes over a period of time and it is never in isolation, but always in a context and culture gives it this context. Finally, strict adherence to context is very important for optimum result.

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