

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF TRANSLATIONS INTO ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

By

A.B. ADEGBITE

Abstract

This paper proposes a two-dimensional approach to describing translation texts from a mother tongue into a second language. The approach observes and describes the process(es) of message transfer from the source to the target language along one dimension and describes the reactions of interpretants to the source and target language messages along the other dimension. The binary-comparative approach is expected to explicate the intricate processes of transferring and interpreting messages in translation more than the unidimensional method of comparing source and target language forms, hitherto being used.

1. Introduction

The field of translation studies provides the necessary link between the theory and practice of translation. According to Andre Lefevre (1978 : 234 – 5), its goal is to provide a comprehensive theory which can be used as a guideline for the production of translations; thus, the field is characterized by textual analyses, descriptions and discussions based on problems, principles and methods of translation. In recent times the theoretical aspect of the studies has been concerned mainly with identifying problems, types and focus of translation and suggesting solutions for translation problems (cf. UNESCO, ed. 1957; Nida and Taber, 1969; Kade, 1971; McGuire, 1980; Newmark, 1981; etc.). Many scholars of translation have also been concerned with suggesting descriptive frameworks for translation theory (cf. Hockett, 1954; Catford, 1965; Nida and Taber, op. cit.; Hartmann, 1980; etc). However, very few scholars (see,

however, Cary and Jumpelt, 1963; Alverson, 1969; House, 1977; Mainz, 1981) have attempted to provide models or suggest methods of assessing the quality of translation. This work presents and describes the functions of a two-dimensional model of assessing the quality of translations done into a second language.

2. *The Criteria for Assessing Translation Quality*

The goal of translation is the preservation of source message in the target language. Translation theoreticians have different conceptions of the message of translation, ranging from preservation of 'form' to preservation of 'content', 'content and style,' 'theme and style,' 'textual material,' 'textual function,' 'response' or 'reactions' of audience, etc. (cf. Prochazka, 1964; Catford, op. cit.; Nida and Taber, op. cit.; Popovic, 1976; Newmark, op. cit.; etc.) A major criterion of message equivalence, according to Nida and Taber (ibid. p.22) is that intelligibility of the target message to listeners is not measured:

"... merely in terms of whether the words are understandable and the sentences grammatically constructed, but in terms of the total impact the message has on the one who receives it."

The criterion for adequate translation, suggested by Alverson and in line with Nida and Taber's "equivalent-response" and Newmark's equivalent - effect principles (see Newmark, op. cit.; p. 247) is "to render an utterance in a target language such that it evokes the same, or nearly similar as possible, set of ideas, concepts, emotive reactions, sememes - call them what you will - in native speakers of the source language." Alverson further uses the back - translation technique to discover equivalence of some utterances in Bantu and English.

In another development, Juliane House (1977) sees translation equivalence in terms of semantic and pragmatic equi-

valence of a translation text. While semantic equivalence operates at the linguistic level, referring to formal features that contribute to meaning of translation, pragmatic equivalence operates at the non-linguistic level of translation, referring to the situational context of translation, including the human participants and their social experiences.

In the discussion in this work, the quality of translation is assessed along two dimensions of transferring and interpreting translations done into a second language, English. The procedure for the assessment of translations is explicated in the section below.

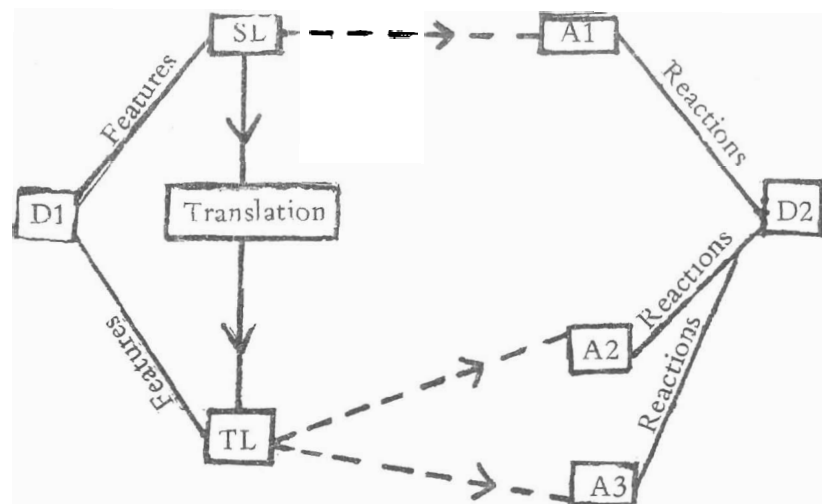
3. *A Binary-comparative Model for Assessing Translation Quality*

This approach assesses the quality of translation via two dimensions. It observes the features at the linguistic (syntactic and semantic) level of translation on the one hand, and the features at the pragmatic level on the other hand. Seeing translation as a communicative discourse, one cannot rest on formal description alone; neither can the assessment of texts be based wholly on personal feelings and impressions of the participants (cf. Crystal and Davy, 1969:7). The description in this work will, thus, centre on (1) a comparison of linguistic features of source and target texts (represented by Yoruba and English) and (2) a comparison of reactions of mother tongue (A2) and non-mother tongue (A3) users of English to the target texts with the reactions of Yoruba audience to the source texts. This procedure is well-illustrated in the diagram below, adapted from Adegbite (1984: 11, 36)

3.1. *The Theoretical Framework for Description*

The description in this work is done via a sociologically based linguistic theory, systemic linguistics (Berry, 1977:1). It is within the framework of this theory that a semiotic description of translation texts, now popular among transla-

FIGURE 1: A Binary Comparison of Translation Features



Key:

D1 – 1st Dimension of Description

D2 – 2nd Dimension of Description

... Dimension of Interpretation

tion scholars (cf. Hartmann, 1980:36), notably Prague linguists and translation theoreticians (Neubert, Kade, Ludskanov, Mukarovsky, Levy, etc.), can be embarked upon.

A sémiotik description subsumes three interrelated types of relations, viz: the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relations (Morris, 1946: 219; Hawkes, 1977: 126–30). While syntax relates signs to one another, semantics relates signs to their real objects and pragmatics relates signs to users of a language. When describing translation texts, semantics normally takes priority over syntax and pragmatics modifies the two.

Both the linguistic and pragmatic levels of translation are not equally accessible to scientific linguistic description. For instance, while the formal items of word choice, word

order, inflection, intonation and choice of mood can be catered for by virtually all formal linguistic theories, pragmatic items such as participants' education, religion, language background, environment, mood and taste can be catered for by a theory of language performance. Even then, a pragmatic description of human reactions often operates on the assumption that the respondents are adequately responsive to verbal stimuli, mentally fit, representative of the group under study and that information given by them are reliable.

3.2 Data Presentation and Description

The constraint on space in this paper does not allow a full explication of the binary-comparative approach with data. However, a description of a few translation texts will no doubt put the work in its right perspective. The four texts observed and described in this study are selected from the data of an earlier work based on recordings of Yoruba Christian sermons delivered and rendered simultaneously into English from the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCOS), Nigeria in 1983. The four texts are among those commented upon by forty respondents in reaction to questions in a questionnaire (see the appendix pp. 11 – 12) distributed randomly among fifty speakers of English with diverse academic interests in Ile-Ife. The respondents range from those who hold a bachelor's degree of a university in any subject to highly educated scholars of the Yoruba and English languages. The assumption here is that respondents must have considerable experience of English for them to be able to comment usefully on the use of the language.

Also, the respondents above are categorised into three groups by virtue of their modes of acquiring English, which may influence their interpretation of texts:

- Yoruba English (Yor. E) bilinguals;
- native speakers of English (EMT speakers); and

c. other non-native speakers of English.

All the respondents were asked to comment on the translation texts using the criteria of intelligibility, adequacy (or acceptability) and grammaticality (see the appendix). In the final assessment the intelligibility of English texts was based on the views of all the respondents, grammaticality was based only on the views of English language scholars (others were marked as abstentions) and native speakers' intuition, and adequacy of translation was based on the views of Yoruba scholars of English and also the full support of EMT speakers. The Yoruba texts were, however explained to native speakers of English who lack access to the source texts before they could comment on the translations done.

The four texts for discussion are presented in the table below together with the responses of audience to them. The source texts are presented in 'a', the translator's versions of the texts are presented in 'b' and the translations suggested in this work presented in 'c'.

Text 1

- a. Mo toro gafara fun aigbo wa ni ose to koja.
b. I apologise for not hearing us last week.
c. Sorry, We couldn't come on air last week.

	Yor. E sp.		EMT sp.		Other sp.		Average Total %
	No. of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	
No of Respondents	20	100	10	100	10	100	
(1) + intelligible	14	70	7	70	8	80	73.33
- intelligible	6	30	3	30	2	20	26.67
Abstentions	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(2) + adequate	3	15	-	0	-	0	05.00
- adequate	17	85	10	100	10	100	95.00
Abstentions	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(3) + Grammatical	1	05	1	10	1	10	08.33
-Grammatical	5	25	9	90	3	30	48.33
Abstentions	14	70	-	0	6	60	43.33

The translator's effort in Text 1b does not adequately represent the meaning of the Yoruba text in 1a. The literal rendition employed by the translator succeeds in creating an ambiguous text in English. Although many of our respondents were able to get the message of the text by referring to the context of translation, some, however, felt they were not sure whether it was the case that:

- (a) either the broadcast did not take place at all;
(b) or the broadcast took place but the reception was poor.

However, an overwhelming percentage of those interviewed believed that the English text was not an adequate translation and was also ungrammatical. Even if the ambiguity was traceable to the source language text itself, it is the duty of a skilful translator to correct the anomaly during translation.

The ungrammaticality of the English text can be attributed to two features. The first is the failure to properly classify the participant roles of 'actor' and 'goal' in the text. While the 'actor' is explicitly stated, the goal is not overtly realised. Thus, it is not clear to whom the speaker's message is directed. The second feature concerns the use of the verb 'hear.' Normally, the verb is not used in the progressive form (i.e. V + -ing) since it is a verb of perception (cf. Hornby, 1975:103).

The fact that some interpretants were able to understand the translated text in spite of the anomalies shows how tolerant people can be during conversation, where ordinary mistakes may go unnoticed.

In Text 2, there is a controversy as to whether the phrase "... call his conscience" is grammatical in English or not. While a substantial number of Yor - E and other non -active speakers of the language believe that the text is grammatical since it conforms with such grammatical rules as concord, tense and word order, the native speakers

Text 2

- a. E je ki olukulu ki o pe okan ara re kuro ninu ibi.
 b. Let everybody call his own conscience from doing evil.
 c. Let everybody turn away from doing evil.

	Yor. E sp.		EMT sp.		Other sp.		Average Total %
	No. of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	
No of Respondents	20	100	10	100	10	100	100
(1) + intelligible	20	100	10	100	10	100	100.00
- intelligible	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
Abstentions	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(2) + adequate	3	15	-	0	2	20	11.67
- adequate	16	80	8	80	8	80	80.00
Abstentions	1	05	2	20	-	0	08.33
(3) + Grammatical	5	25	4	40	4	40	35.00
- Grammatical	1	05	6	60	1	10	25.00
Abstentions	14	70	-	0	5	50	40.00

believe that the non-collocation of 'call' and 'conscience' is an aspect of non-conformity with the rules of grammar. Thus, there is a distinction made here between **grammar** in the restricted sense of 'syntax' and grammar in the wider sense of 'correctness of language forms' (cf. Tomori, 1977:1)

Two features are relevant for meaning in the translation in Text 3 above. First, there is the non-representation of the 'non-jussive' imperative form in the source text ("E je ki...") which means "Let us..." in the target language. Instead, the latter makes a choice of positive modality ("we must...") from the modal system. The significance of the choice of mood and modality (cf. Afolayan, 1977:118) in the two texts for meaning is that while the command in the source text is very subtle, that in the target text is forceful and it indicates compulsion.

Text 3

- a. E je ki a fi Olorrùn sí ipò Re.
 b. God must be put in his proper position
 c. Let us give God the honour due to Him.

	Yor. E sp.		EMT sp.		Other sp.		Average Total %
	No. of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	
No. of Respondents	20	100	10	100	10	100	100
(1) + intelligible	20	100	10	100	10	100	100.00
- intelligible	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
Abstentions	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(2) + adequate	13	65	-	0	4	40	35.00
- adequate	7	35	10	100	6	60	65.00
Abstentions	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(3) + Grammatical	6	30	10	100	5	50	60.00
- Grammatical	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
Abstentions	14	70	-	0	5	50	40.00

And in the context of christian sermon presentations preachers often prefer to coax rather than force their audience to react or act in a certain manner.

The distinction made between mood and modality in the text also coincides with the distinction between the 'active' and 'passive' choices made by the source and target texts respectively from the voice system, and even the 'unmarked' and 'marked' choices from the system of theme. Thus, while the audience (the actors) realise the subject (the initial focus) of the source text, it is 'God' (the goal) that realises the subject in the target text and the audience are not overtly realized in it.

The second feature relevant for meaning is the ambiguity of the expression '... put in his proper position.' Opinions are divided in respect of the adequacy of the translation done into English here. Some respondents claimed that the

English text expressed the same meaning as the Yoruba text (i.e. 'that we accord the necessary respect to God'), while some also claimed that the target message was not what was intended in the source text (i.e. what the target text says is 'that God must be disciplined'). All the respondents, nevertheless, claimed that they understood the meaning intended for the target text in spite of the anomaly mentioned above.

Text 4

- a. Awayeelo o si.
- b. You can't say you'll come to this world and you won't go.
- c. Everyone in this world must die.

	Yor. E. sp		EMT sp.		Other sp.		Average Total %
	No. of Respon	%	No of Respon	%	No. of Respon	%	
No of Respondents	20	100	10	100	10	100	100
(1) + intelligible	20	100	10	100	10	100	100.00
- intelligible		0		0	-	0	0.00
Abstentions		0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(2) + adequate	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
- adequate	20	100	10	100	10	100	100.00
Abstentions	-	0	-	0	-	0	0.00
(3) + Grammatical	4	20	9	90	2	20	43.33
- Grammatical	2	10	1	10	3	30	16.67
Abstentions	14	70	-	0	-	0	40.00

The translation method employed in Text 4 is too literal, which does not allow for adequate rendition of the source message in the target text. The agglutinative word 'Awayeelo' has been translated into English in the separate senses of its constituents rather than its sense as a word. Consider,

- a - the act (of)

- wa - coming
 ve - the contracted form of 'aye' (world)
 e - the contracted form of 'lai' (without)
 lo - going

Again, all our respondents conceded that they understood the English text, even though the translation was inadequate.

Another source of controversy in Text 4 is the grammaticality of the translation. Some respondents claimed that the 'present future' tense form 'will come' is in a wrong sequence to the 'past future' form 'won't go' (which we believe is not true because the operator 'won't' is the enclitic form of 'will not' and 'would not'), thus making the text ungrammatical. However, almost all of our native English - speaking respondents observed that the form, 'won't' was just performing a modal function of expressing 'unwillingness' in the text and it was put there not necessarily to indicate a particular tense. While the text may seem awkward, the latter group claimed that it was not ungrammatical.

4. Summary and Conclusion

From the observations made above, we notice that translation texts can be intelligible even if there are minor grammatical or technical errors in them. However, the two factors of grammaticality and adequacy of translations are essential for the texts to receive wide acceptability. It is pertinent to note that, in spite of the fact that translation is done into a second language, the target texts in this work are meant for English speakers all over the world with their diverse linguistic experiences. Yet, all the audience are expected to understand an equivalent message of the source text in the target language.

The problem with simultaneous translation (this title is used deliberately here - cf. Adegbite, 1984 : 6-7) practice into English in Nigeria is not because the translations are done into a second language, but because the handlers of

the translations are biligual speakers without adequate competence in English and necessary training for the job. To many translation scholars in the Western world, the normal thing to do is for a translator to translate into his mother tongue because his ability in his mother tongue is unsurpassable. But looking at the African situation, Ukoyen (1979 : 72) rightly observes that:

"... the African translator seldom makes use of his mother tongue to perform formal professional tasks... what we have in Africa is a marked dominance of English and French as working languages. . . ."

What is very important for efficient translations into English in Nigeria is that the tasks be handled by trained professionals who have adequate competence in the source and target languages, no matter whether they are native or second language speakers of the target language.

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. a. Name of Respondent (Optional)
- b. Age (Tick the right box) Below 20yrs ☐ 20-25 ☐ 25-30 ☐ 30-35 ☐ above 35yrs ☐
- c. Sex (Tick the right box) Male ☐ female ☐
- d. Languages spoken in order of fluency:
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
- e. Nationality: _____
- f. Educational Qualifications: _____
- g. Occupation: _____

Years of Experience (If employed)

☐ below 5 yrs

☐ 5 - 10 yrs

☐ 10 - 15 yrs

☐ 15 and above

h. Religion (Tick the right-box) ☐ Christianity

Islam ☐ Islam

Traditional ☐ Traditional Religion

☐ Others

2. The texts below are samples of translation texts collected from a weekly broadcast of Yoruba Christian sermon translation into English on the Radio Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State in January 1983. Please comment on the translations in respect of (a) whether the English texts are grammatical and meaningful to you, (b) whether the English texts convey the same meaning which the Yoruba texts convey, (c) giving reasons for the inadequacies or ungrammaticality (if any) of the English texts, and (d) giving translation alternatives, if necessary.

Thank you for your cooperation.

A. B. Adegbite (Mr.) .

Yoruba Text	English Text	Do the English Texts convey any meaning to you? Are they grammatical?	Are the English Texts adequate renditions of Yoruba Texts?	Responses for inadequacies or ungrammaticality.	Translation suggestions, if any.

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