Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327
مجلة اللغة الانكليزية في العالم العربي

AWEJ. Special Issue on Translation No.3 May, 2014

Pp. 116-123

Semantic and Syntactic Challenges in Translating Political News Reports from English into Arabic and vice versa: A Linguistic Approach

Ahmad Mohammad Ahmad AL-Harahsheh
Department of Translation
Yarmouk University, Irbid-Jordan

Mohammed Mahmoud Obeidat
Department of Translation
Yarmouk University, Irbid-Jordan

Abstract
The present paper aims at shedding light on semantic and syntactic challenges that Arab translators encounter when translating news reports from English into Arabic and vice versa. Thirty one graduate students were asked to translate three political texts from Arabic into English and three texts from English into Arabic. The theoretical framework chosen for this study draws on linguistic approach to translation. The results of the study show that translators encountered semantic and syntactic challenges when rendering political news reports into the Target Language.

***Keywords*:** linguistic approach, translation, media discourse, semantics, and syntax.

1. Introduction

The popularization of newspapers, in both printed and online forms, has a great effect on the process of translation all over the world. Newspapers depend on news agencies whose job is not only to gather news events from all over the world, but also to translate this news into different languages. News reports represent a source for popular written discourse for lots of people furnishing them with updates on evident events (Van Dijk, 1988).With the growing need to broadcast the news in different languages and having access to the news broadcasted in other languages, translation has become in vogue for news agencies. Hence, numerous newspapers hire translators whose primary duty is to translate news that is transferred by great news agencies such as AFP, BBC, Reuters, Voice of America, etc.

News discourse has been studied, analyzed, and commented on by lots of scholars coming from different backgrounds including, for instance, linguistics, critical discourse analysis and translation studies (see van Dijk, 1988; Bell, 1991, 1998, 2003; Waugh, 1995, Fowler, 1991, 1996; Fairclough, 1995, 1998; Chilton & Schaffner, 1997; Hatim, 1997; Kelly, 1998). Branco (2011) provides a methodological procedure for translating online news reports based on Chesterman's (1997) framework with special emphasis on three categories of translation strategies including semantic, syntactic and pragmatic with reflections on translations.

In Jordan, there are three newspapers issued in English: Petra News Agency (official news agency), Ammon News is issued in both Arabic and English while the Jordan Times is only issued in English. This paper studies the challenges that MA translation students encounter when translating political news report from Arabic into English and vice versa. This paper aims at identifying these challenges based on the following levels: semantic and syntactic. It also attempts to suggest solutions and strategies that enhance translation students' performance in translating political texts. This study is original and significant, as it is based on the observations of the actual training settings.

1.1 Language in the Media

There is a consensual relationship between language and media, as journalists use language to describe the lens sights of their cameras; their main goal is to transmit an effective message to their audiences they accommodate language according to their needs. However, they do not care of the grammaticality of the sentences they write rather than their emotive effects on the audiences. They depend on the element of suspense; their main goal is to transmit an effective message to their audiences. According to Rayner et al. (2004, p. 2), media "produce and 'package' versions of events and issues in their output, and which we consume as part of our daily lives and situations." However, its characteristics will never be changed such as its spontaneousness, its products are shared i.e. known to everyone, it is directed to a large number of people, it is controlled by institutions, it relies heavily on advanced technology and its products are expensive to produce (Rayner et al.,2004).

Johnson and Ensslin (2007) define language used in the media as *metalanguage*, i.e. language employed to talk about language. Preston (2004), cited in Johnson and Ensslin (2007, p. 13), defines metalanguage as: (1) consists of language about language, i.e. in a discussion about the pronunciation of a word, (2) metalanguage presumably involves less explicit form of linguistic commentary where there is simply a mention of talk itself. "

Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that media language should be analyzed as discourse and media discourse should be *linguistically* analyzed. Fairclough (1995) indicates that communicative events are temporally and spatially disjoined. That is, the place and time of the

production of the mass media text is different from the place and the time of consumption of that text. For example, a communicative text may occur in the USA and broadcast in Jordan. As a result of temporal and spatial parameters, communicative event can be considered as "a chain of communicative events" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 37). Trew (1979), cited in Fairclough (1995), states that discourse consists of ideological and linguistic processes and there is a strong relationship between them, i.e. the linguistic choices are affected by ideological meanings.

1.2 Political Discourse

Political discourse is characterized as "a complex form of human activity" (Chilton and Schaffner, 1997, p. 207), as politics can be practiced without language (Schaffner, 2004). Politics therefore rely heavily on the professional use of language. The more professional the politician, the more successful and famous s/he will be. For example, in the election debates and campaigns, the one who uses emotive and logical form of language, s/he is likely to win the elections. Media play a pivotal role in "disseminating politics and in mediating between politicians and the public" (Schaffner, 2004, p. 118). That is to say, media is a mediator between politicians and their audiences, i.e. without media, the politicians will be unable to disseminate their political points of view to the public. In recent years, mass media has had a powerful role in broadcasting the messages and the political views of a certain political group or party. The role of media does not excluded in publicizing news rather it plays a significant role in publicizing war or peace, especially in the Middle East region, i.e. Aljazeerah T.V. channel plays a powerful role in the Arab Spring movement. It has been able in changing some political regimes in the region.

The participants in the communicative context determine whether the text is political or not; there are some types of political texts called prototypical texts i.e. texts that tackle political views, ideas, beliefs and practices of a society (Schaffner, 2004).These kind of texts are studied by discourse analysis.; different approaches have been applied in analysing these texts such as pragmatic, textual, discourse-historical and socio-cognitive methods (Schaffner, 2004).

The most ostensive problems in translated works are the linguistic related ones as they directly hamper the conveyance of the message from SL into TL. Thus, the inseparable relationship between translation and linguistics can be described as a *tug of war*, or using Malmkjær (2011, p. 61) words this relationship has not been 'harmonious'. Some linguists including Nida (1964), Catford (1965) and Gutt (1991), for instance, dedicated some of their research to bridge the gaps between translation and linguistics.

The major concern that translators strive for is that of equivalence (see Catford 1965, Nida 1964, Newmark 1988, for example). Translators work hard to maintain equivalence between SL and TL with more focus on both the level of lexis and the level of syntax. Therefore, Vinay & Darbelnet (1995, pp.11-12) point out that lexical items and syntax represent very crucial features for conveying the message. Along the same lines, Catford (1965, p. 1) indicates that "translation is an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another." This definition implies that this process of substation of texts takes place at the levels of lexis and syntax. So, when conveying messages across languages, the messages will be represented through different linguistic patterns using different lexical items and different syntactic structures.

Translated news reports into Arabic attract a wide audience who only form their understanding of the events around them through these translations. The present paper studies

translating news reports from English into Arabic with special emphasis on lexical and syntactic challenges, which translators encounter.

Theoretical Framework

As the paper concerned with the lexical and syntactic challenges, the appropriate theoretical framework for this study is the linguistic approach as divorcing linguistics from translation is "a tug of war". Equivalence, which is the most imperative concern of translators, can be attained linguistically in a successful way.

1. Methods and Procedures

The methodology of the current study draws on qualitative approach, such as observations, note-taking and ethnography. The data of the current study were collected during the Fall semester 2012-2013 at Yarmouk University (Irbid-Jordan). These data were assigned to a course titled "Mass Media Translation" for MA students whereby 31 students were asked to translate six political texts in three different sessions: three from English into Arabic and three from Arabic into English. The length of each text was about 250 words and the time allocated for translating each text was one hour. Before that, students translated different political texts in the classroom. The purpose behind this study was unknown for the participants in order to avoid confusion and to keep the mainstream of translation as normal.

The translated data was analyzed and the challenges that students face during translation were classified into two categories: semantic (inconsistency of word selections) and syntactic (grammatical mistakes).

2. Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to support the study's main argument that understanding the Source Text (ST) is the most prominent step in the process of translation from SL to TL. The study has found that many translation students did not understand the ST in Arabic, thus they had committed many semantic and syntactic errors. Shunnaq (2000) states nine problems facing Arab translators when translating texts into English namely; syntactic problems, number and gender, relative nouns/pronouns/clauses, text-types, emotiveness, monitoring and managing, lexical non-equivalence, cultural difficulty i.e. proverbial expressions and euphemism, and synonymy. This study narrows down these problems into semantic and syntactic challenges.

Semantic Challenges

Semantics is the study of meaning or the conceptual and literal meaning of words. So, the translators' main duty is to fully convey the meaning of the ST into the TT. It is a hard mission for translators to find the most adequate equivalent word or expression in the TL. One of the reasons could be that the concept or the word does not exist in the TL, for instance the Arabic expression صلة الرحم is culture-bound and does not exist in English (Shunnaq, 1999). As we know, complete synonyms are impossible in the same language let alone translations. Let us first shed light on some of the semantic challenges that student encounter during the translation process; they include the following:

1.1.1.1. Lexical non-equivalence

As mentioned above, finding complete equivalent terms is a difficult task for translators because of lexical gaps and the cultural background between the two languages (Shunnaq, 2000). In

political discourse, there are certain terms and concepts which are understood by politicians or those who specialize in the field of politics; it may be referred to as anti-language, a type of language which is used and understood among a certain group of people. The findings of the study show that translators have a challenge in finding equivalences at the sentence level. Consider the following example:

(1)

[ST] قال الجيش الاسرائيلي انه استهدف "مواقع نشاط ارهابي لحماس وفرق ارهابية مسؤولة عن اطلاق الصواريخ" لكنه لم يذكر تفاصيل وتقول القوات الاسرائيلية **انها لن تتهاون مع مثل هذه الهجمات وستعتبر حماس مسؤولة عنها.**

*[TT] Israeli army said that they **objected** some places that had terrorist movements for Hamas and other terrorist groups responsible for launching missiles but **he** didn't go in details.*

Considering example (1) above, the English translation is not equivalent to the Arabic source text. First, the translator does not choose the right lexical equivalence in the TL, i.e. the verb "istahdafa" استهدف in Arabic does not mean "objected" rather it means "targeted". The sentence *"some places that had terrorist movements for Hamas"* is not semantically equivalent to the Arabic source text "مواقع نشاط ارهابي لحماس وفرق ارهابية مسؤولة عن اطلاق الصواريخ". The translator misunderstands what is meant by the ST. Therefore, the translation was misleading. The Arabic sentence means that "*Israeli army targeted some sites for terrorist activities and groups who are responsible for launching missiles"*. In addition, the translator neglects translating the following statement into English قالت اسرائيل انها لن تتهاون مع مثل هذه الهجمات وستعتبر حماس مسؤولة عنها **,** "*Israel also stated that they will not tolerate such attacks and Hamas hold responsibility for them*." Again, the phrase لكنه لم يذكر تفاصيل is translated as "***he** didn't go in details"*, the translator uses the pronoun "he" to refer to "Israeli army". Instead of saying "they did not provide further details", the translator tends to word-for-word translation which is completely misleading. This example enforces the argument that understanding the Source Text (ST) is essential before commencing the process of translation, because it helps the translator to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding.

(2)

[ST]إسرائيل تقصف أهدافا في غزة بعد إطلاق صواريخ عليها

[ST] Israel is shelling Gaza after shooting a rocket on it.

The translator does not employ the equivalent or synonymous word when translating the title of the news. For instance, s/he chose "is shelling" as equivalent to تقصف [literally, bombs], as shelling is used "artillery" not for "military aircraft". Furthermore, the translator utilizes "shooting a rocket" instead of "launching rockets". The translator also ignores the noun "targets".

(3)

[TT] ويسود التوتر منطقة الحدود وكثيرا ما تقع اشتباكات

[ST] The stress dominates the borders area and there are many clashes.

Again, the translator uses the inconsistent equivalent/synonymous word. For instance, the translator employs the word "stress" instead of توتر which is not equivalent/synonymous for "tension". The word "dominates" which is also inappropriate. The model translation for the whole sentence should be "the borders area witness tension and clashes occur".

Syntactic Challenges

Translation students have also faced many grammatical challenges such as subject-verb agreement, prepositions, tenses, and verb forms. The following example exhibits this phenomenon:

(4)

[ST] ويخضع قطاع غزة لسيطرة حماس منذ عام 2007 وخاضت الحركة واسرائيل حربا استمرت ثلاثة اسابيع في الفترة بين ديسمبر كانون الاول ويناير كانون الثاني 2008-2009. ويسود التوتر منطقة الحدود وكثيرا ما تقع اشتباكات.

[TT] Gaza is under hamas's control since 2007, **the movement went through a war Israel for three** weeks, between December of 2008 and January of 2009; the tension is still there, in the border-line area, and many *clashes occurs.*

In the above mentioned example, we observe several grammatical mistakes. For instance, the translator employed the wrong aspect form of the verb in the first sentence "Gaza *is under hamas's control since 2007*". The action of the verb in this example started in the past and it is still continuing in the future. The translator has to use the present perfect aspect, thus the sentence has to be written as "Gaza Strip has been under the domination of Hamas since 2007". In addition, the translator did not capitalize the letter 'h' in "Hamas" which is a proper noun. Further, instead of saying "clashes occur", the translator wrote "clashes occurs", s/he had a grammatical mistake with subject-verb agreement. However, these minor errors occur frequently; these mistakes are unintentional. After students are asked about these errors, they confirm that they are aware of them, but did so accidentally. The underlined sentence is also incomplete because it needs a preposition like "against", thus the sentence must be written as "Hamas and Israel went through a war lasted for three weeks, from December, 2008-January, 2009; tension reveals on the borders and clashes between them are common there."

Translators also make subject–verb errors when translating texts from English into Arabic. Consider the following example:

(5)

[ST] Businesses and services in the north-eastern US are expected to start re-opening on Wednesday after two days of closure forced by storm Sandy.

[TT] من المتوقع من الاعمال والخدمات أن تبدأ عملها في شرق الولايات الامريكية يوم الاربعاء بعد ان اجبرت على الاغلاق يوميين متتاليين بسبب اعصار ساندي.

Apparently, the translator renders the ST literally, so s/he has a grammatical error when the translator converts the verb and the subject of the Arabic sentence. That is to say, the sentence should be:

تستأنف الشركات والخدمات اعمالها يوم الاربعاء في شمال شرق الولايات المتحدة الامريكية بعدما اجبرت على الاغلاق لمدة يومين بسبب اعصار ساندي.

Translators also commit mistakes in subject-verb agreement, especially when "there" is the subject of a sentence, because the distinction is not available in Arabic, i.e. يوجد شخص خلف الباب " there is a person behind the door" (singular), يوجد اشخاص خلف الباب "There are persons behind the door" (plural). For singular and plural, there is only one form for the verb in Arabic. In some cases translators tend to use a plural verb after a gerund. Example (6) below sheds light on this phenomenon:

(6)

[ST] يسود التوتر منطقة الحدود وكثيرا ما تقع اشتباكات.
[TT] The border is prevailed with tension and ***there is a lot of combats.***

Selecting the appropriate proposition and the pronouns in English are another syntactic challenge that translators encounter. This may be due to the translators' lack of proficiency of the English language. Consider example (7) below:

(7)

[ST] وتقول القوات الاسرائيلة انها لن تتهاون مع مثل هذه الهجمات وستعتبر حماس مسؤولة عنها.
[TT]The Israeli army said that ***he*** aimed "places that had terrorism activity and on the terrorist groups that were *responsible of* launching the rockets".

In this example, the translator uses "***he"*** to refer to the Israeli Army, and she uses "responsible of" instead of "responsible for". These challenges are noticeable through the data analyzed.

Conclusion

Based on linguistic approach, the present paper studies translating news reports and focuses on semantic and syntactic challenges that translators encounter. It shows that the lack of comprehension of the SL text constitutes a very important factor that leads to providing semantically non-equivalent lexical items in the TL to those of the SL. Furthermore, lack of focus and attention on the part of the translators resulted in creating syntactic related problems including subject-verb agreement, adequate prepositions and grammatical issues. Semantics and syntax constitute the backbone of any type of discourse which aims at creating channels of communication among people; if mishandled, the consequences can be far reaching. Therefore, we need to focus on conveying messages that are semantically accurate and syntactically correct in the TL as well as those in the SL. In addition, translators might need to do background reading to acquaint themselves with the subject matter where necessary. Besides, translators should read the ST more than one time, understand and analyze it, before they transfer it into the TL. Moreover, translators should avoid word-by-word translation and focus on conveying the full meaning of the ST.

About the Authors:

Dr. Ahmad Mohammad Ahmad Al-Harahsheh is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics and Translation in the Translation Department at Yarmouk University, Irbid-Jordan. His research interests include sociolinguistics, pragmatics, political discourse analysis, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and translation theories.

Dr. Mohammed Mahmoud Obeidat is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Translation in the Translation Department at Yarmouk University. His research interests include discourse analysis, political discourse, pragmatics, and translation theories.

References

Bell, Allan. (1991). The Language of News Media. Oxford: Blackwell.
Bell, Allan. (1998). The Discourse Structure of News Stories. In: Bell, A. & Peter Garrett (eds.) Approaches to Media Discourse. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 64-104
Bell, Allan (2003). A Century of News Discourse. IJES, 3, (1), 189: 208.

Branco, Sinara de Oliveira. (2011). Describing the methodological procedure of a translation studies investigation based on corpora. DOMÍNIOS DE LINGU@GEM Revista Eletrônica de Linguística 5, (1), pp. 95- 118.

Catford, J.C. (1965). A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chilton, Paul and Schaffner, Christina. (1997). Discourse and Politics. In: Teun van Dijk (ed.). Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, 2: Discourse as Social Interaction. London: Sage, 206–230.

Fairclough, N. (1995). Media Discourse. London: Edward Arnold.

Fairclough, N. (1998). Political Discourse in the Media: An Analytical Framework. In: Bell, Allan; Peter Garrett (eds.). Approaches to Media Discourse. Oxford: Blackwell, 142-162.

Fowler, Roger. (1991). Language in the News, Discourse and Ideology in the Press. London: Routledge.

Fowler, Roger. (1996). "On Critical Linguistics". In: Caldas-Coulthard Carmen & Malcolm Coulthard (eds.). Texts and Practices: readings in critical discourse analysis. London & New York: Routledge: 3-14.

Gutt. E. A. (1991). Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Manchester: St. Jerome.

Hatim, Basil. (1997). Discourse Features in Non-Verbal Communication. In: Poyatos, Fernando (ed.). Nonverbal Communication and Translation: New Perspectives and Challenges in Literature, Interpretation and the Media. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 49-66.

Johnson, Sally & Astrid Ensslin (eds) (2007) Language in the Media: Representations, Identities, Ideologies. London: Continuum.

Kelly, Dorothy. (1998). Ideological Implications of Translation Decisions: Positive Self and Negative Other Presentation. Quaderns. Revista de Traducció, 1, 57-63.

Malmkjær, Kirsten (2011). Linguistics and Translation. Handbook of Translation Studies 2, 61-68.

Newmark, P. (1988). A Textbook of Translation. London: Prentice-Hall International.

Nida, Eugine (1964). Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Rayner, Philip; Wall, Peter & Stephen Kurger (2004). As Media Studies: The Essential Introduction (2nd Edition). London & New York: Routeldge.

Schaffner, Christina (2004). Political Discourse Analysis of Translation Studies Political Discourse Analysis. Journal of Language and Politics 3(1): 117–150.

Shunnaq, Abdullah (2000). Arabic-English Translation of Political Discourse. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*. 8:3,207-228.

Trew, T. (1979). 'What the Papers Say': Linguistic Variation and Ideological Difference. In: Fowler, R.(et al)(eds), Language and Control. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1988) News as Discourse. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Vinay, J. P. & Darbelnet, J. (1958). Stylistque Comparée du FranÇais et de l'anglais. Paris: Edition Didier. English translation and edition by Juan Sager & M. J. Hamel (1995). Comperative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Waugh, Linda R. (1995). Reported Speech in Journalistic Discourse: The Relation of Function and Text. Text, 15, (1), 129-173.