

Using Translation as a Means of Overcoming Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to shed light on some of the major areas where cross-cultural pragmatic failures occur. It further argues that translation may be profitably used in EFL classes as a means of minimizing if not eradicating such failures.*

1. Introduction

A number of researchers (Al-Shabab, 1996; Rutherford and Smith, 1985; Sperber, 1986; Brislin, 1976; Coumlas, 1981) have pointed to the neglected area of cross-cultural pragmatic failures, i.e. the inappropriate transfer of pragmatic norms from the native language (L1) to the target language (TL). Areas of possible mismatch within pragmatics such as linguistic routines, formulae, speech acts politeness phenomenon ...etc. have all been described with considerable delicacy (cf. Faerch and Kasper 1983; House and Kasper 1981). However, very little has been said about the pedagogical applications of the insightful details which have been gathered. Foreign language learners with an adequate command of the syntactic and lexical components of TL often find it difficult to transfer NL pragmatic norms to their foreign language counterparts.

This paper attempts to explore the extent to which translation may be used as pedagogical means of overcoming cross-cultural pragmatic failures. By using translation to render the right pragmatic equivalents within problematic areas, we may find a simple but effective strategy of realizing Hymes' (1971) goal of teaching the rules of "use" without which the rules of grammar would be useless.

Translation has long been dismissed as a teaching device in language pedagogy mainly because of its association with the much criticized 'Grammar Translation Method'. In line with this, there is a trend running through language teaching which stipulates that the only way to become

proficient in a foreign language is to shake off the shackles of any mother tongue influence and-as it were- to go native, and eventually to think in the TL. This, to many foreign language practitioners, is misinformed because translation is largely about the search for equivalence between languages. Full equivalence clearly involves pragmatic as well as semantic features. It involves sorting out what is intended from what is said, and redrafting what is intended into what is said in the other language. As such, translation provides a very useful environment for presenting and solving problems of pragmatic failure.

2. Pragmatic Failures

Thomas (1983) divides pragmatic failures into two major types. Below is a brief discussion of these types.

2.1. Pragmalinguistic Failure: This occurs when the pragmatic force mapped onto the utterance by the speaker differs from the force which a native speaker would usually attribute to that utterance. The inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies such as those investigated by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) in the Cross- Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns Project (CCSARP) serve as examples of pragmalinguistic failure. If, for example, a request were to be misunderstood as a question about the addressee's ability, as for instance in the following two examples, the result will be a case of pragmalinguistic failure:

- Can you type this letter?
- Yes, I type very well.

2.2. Socio-pragmatic Failure: This concerns judgments about the social conditions placed on language use. It includes decisions concerning the size of imposition, cost /benefit, social distance and relative rights and obligations of speakers and addressees. There is no absolute distinction between these two areas, but rather, they form a continuum. The overuse of the Arabic word *shukran* شكرًا for 'thank you' by a learner of English as a foreign language (EFL) might be due to a misunderstanding regarding the force of the word and thus its use might be pragmalinguistic failure. On the other hand, it might be due to a different reception of which goods (in Goffman's sense) it is to offer thanks for. In most Arab cultures, it would be unnecessary to thank someone for a cigarette. In such a case this would be a problem of socio-pragmatic failure. Compared to pragmalinguistic failure, socio- pragmatic failure is potentially more

serious and is more likely to lead to racial stereotyping.

3. Areas of Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure

The specific areas of failure examined here are: (i) Linguistic routines/formulae ; ii) speech acts realizations; (iii) information structure (i.e. the foregrounding and back grounding of information); and (iv) schemas.

3.1. Linguistic Routines and Formulae

Transformational generative grammarians stressed the creative aspect of language and arguing that language has an infinitely creative aspect and therefore cannot be accommodated within a behaviouristic theory which reduced language to mere habit. Unfortunately, such an emphasis reduced the importance of routine and the use of prefabricated language. A Canadian study (Sorhus, 1977) suggested that as much as five percent of language is formulaic. Formulaic language is important for a number of reasons. First, formulae have historical links with animal behaviour (cf. greeting). Second, they are of considerable socio-cultural importance which a particular culture attaches to certain values e.g. autonomy of the individual as against group solidarity. (See, for example, Więzrbicka, 1985 on Polish and the absence of a word for 'privacy').

Formulae and routines range along a continuum of fixedness like idioms. In other words, some of them are relatively free and may be varied in whole or in part. The Arabic greeting *marhaba* مرحبا (lit. welcome) can alternate with *marhabtain* مرحبتين (lit. two welcomes). However, there are restrictions on the occurrence of the second form.. For example, one cannot say--except perhaps jokingly-- 'ten welcomes' عشر مرحاب or 'thousand' ألف مرحبا. Other formulae are completely frozen and may not be varied. For instance, the Arabic phrase *assalam alaykum* السلام عليكم (peace be upon you) is invariably answered by a root echoic response *wa alaykum assalaam* - وعلَيْكُمْ السَّلَام (and upon you peace).

Viewed diachronically, formulae give access to what is valued within a culture. For instance, Ferguson (1981) points out that the Arabic formula *na'i:man* نعيما (lit. be smooth) and its root echoic response *allah yin'im alayk*, الله ينعِم عليك which are said after someone has had a bath, a shave or haircut are only found in the isogloss where the Roman /Turkish bath culture existed. It is not found in most Gulf Arab countries where such a culture never existed.

Native speakers tend to use prefabricated gap fillers in order to gain

time whilst attending to higher level cognitive processes such as forward planning discourse. These are what Lesser and Erman (1977) have aptly named 'islands of reliability' and their importance for EFL learners, whose planning time needs are much greater, should not be underestimated. Native speakers also use them as discourse markers to perform various communicative functions: eg.

- to point out a change in topic: 'by the way' (ala fikra) على فكره
- to retain a turn in a conversation 'listen': اسمع , 'wait a minute, (istanna shway) استنا شوي
- to appoint/choose a new speaker: shu rayak? شو رايك? (What do you think?)

Such routines are essential for foreign language learners as they create an impression of fluency which will maintain input in communication and enable progress. A student who sounds too hesitant or lacking in fluency may find it difficult to maintain contact for any length of time with native speakers. This is particularly true if the learner happens to be communicating with a native speaker of English. In such cases, any kind of hesitation may fault in the learner continuing his conversation in the mother tongue. Indeed, EFL learners clearly need formulae like the following in order to manage communication and manage their own learning:

Please speak more slowly.

Would you please repeat that?

What does X mean in Arabic?...etc.

Enabling students to translate formulae like these would be an efficient way of building up a body of formulaic speech which can then serve as a short cutting device.

It has been claimed that requests in English which proportionally appear as questions of ability like

- Can you pass the salt.

are interpreted through a Grecian theory of implicature by reference to the Grecian maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975). It is much more probable that, though originally perhaps arrived at in this way, such requests have become automatic and this inferencing process has, as it were, been short circuited. Unfortunately, EFL learners may not have made such formulae automatic and may still require interpreting them through a lengthy process of inferencing. Here again translation, being itself essentially a process of inferencing, proves useful. Formulae in the mother tongue would be transferred into their respective equivalents in the target language and hopefully made automatic, thus freeing valuable time for higher level cognitive operations like forward planning.

In a contrastive view of Polish and Anglo Saxon routines, Wierzbicka (1985) maintains that having set expressions for particular occasions releases the speaker from the embarrassment of trying to be creative, perhaps producing an unhappy effect. At funerals it is reported that English speakers say things like:

Words fail me at times like this.

Nothing I could say at a time like this would be adequate.

Cultures which have set formulae e.g. Arabic Allah yirhamu الله يرحمه (may God have compassion on him) do not risk being misinterpreted, nor does the addressee feel lack of support or sympathy, as what was expected and required has been said. It is very important for EFL learners to know that in such situations attempting to be creative is likely to produce quite serious pragmatic failure.

3.2. Speech Acts

A number of scholars have investigated the different ways in which speech acts may be realized and have compared these differences across culturally. The most notable is perhaps the work of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) in the project referred to above (1). This work involved producing questionnaires where the participants were asked to provide requests which had been contextually framed in the questionnaire. Participant roles were described as shown in the following example:

-you are a policeman asking a woman driver to move her car which is parked in an emergency exit during a fire

- What do you say to her?

We have a number of reservations about the use of questionnaires to investigate oral phenomena due to the fact that they impose premeditation of what are essentially spontaneous acts. However, given the difficulty of overcoming problems of objectivity across a wide range of languages, the evidence is very valuable and, we believe, strongly suggestive. The subjects chosen for the aforementioned project were: (1) native speakers of Hebrew, and (2) non native speakers whose mother tongue was English. The researchers noticed that non-native speakers tended to use long utterances and that the level of directness used was greater than that of native speakers. This tendency of non-native speakers to be too direct has also been confirmed by House and Kasper (1981), who looked at German speakers learning English. Similarly, Thomas (1983) reported the same findings with Russian speakers of English and noticed the same thing among Arab speakers who sometimes import the word Tab'an طبعا (which translates in context as "of course" with unfortunate results e.g.

- Can you speak English?
- Of course. (instead of 'yes', 'indeed' or 'certainly.')

Where pragmatic failures occur due to the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies, the consequences can be serious and translation exercises in finding pragmatic equivalents of NL speech acts in the TL would help to solve this problem.

3.3. Information Structure

Languages have different systems for foregrounding or backgrounding information. Some languages use position within the utterance e.g., what occurs at the beginning of the utterance is 'given' whilst what occurs at the end is 'new'. The same holds for 'theme' and 'rheme', or 'topic' and 'comment' in English. However, whereas some languages prefer prosodic means, others like Hindi, mark contrast morphemically. The potential for failure here is considerably high and again the use of carefully chosen examples which explain the contrasts between systems might be translated. This is likely to provide EFL learners with insights which would be incorporated into their interlanguage. On the same point Rutherford and Smith (1985) point out that "consciousness raising," concerning pragmatic failures amongst languages is a facilitating factor in acquiring communicative competence in TL. Such "consciousness raising," can be triggered by systematic and explicit translation activities/tasks.

3.4. Schema Theory

Due to the limitation of space we will not be able to go into details of this important topic. Suffice it in the context of this paper to refer, albeit briefly, to the more important aspects of the schema theory. Very simply, the schema theory of reading claims that background knowledge provides an essential key to the understanding of a text. Readers are able to understand a text by measuring it against the background of their own experience of the world. This experience is conditioned by such factors as age, sex, race, occupation, class ...etc., which can be subsumed under the term culture. Steffenson (1986) looked into the way people from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same TL text. Steffenson's hypothesis is that readers who share the same culture as the writer will bring the appropriate schema to the text, whereas those who read a text from an unfamiliar culture will have difficulty relating the details of the text to

any known schema and that this will lead to a breakdown in the process of comprehension.

Steffenson (1986) conducted a number of experiments which provide useful data for her hypothesis. Adults from the United States and India were given two letters, the first describing an American wedding and the second describing an Indian wedding. Then they were asked to complete a different short task in order to inhibit short term memory of any details in any letter. After that, they were asked to recall the details of both letters. In this context, Steffenson noted several effects of cultural interference. The subjects read the native passages more rapidly than the foreign ones and recalled far more of the native passages; they also produced more errors in the recall of the foreign text.

A similar experiment was conducted with American and Australian Aboriginal women who listened to two texts read aloud, one about illness and treatment in the West and another on an Aboriginal perspective on the same subject. They were then asked to give short personal histories to inhibit short term memory and then required to recall both texts. This experiment produced similar results to the first.

What emerges from the experiments referred to above is the clear influence of culture on the comprehension of texts. Even speakers of the same broad language e.g. Americans and British can engage in the wrong schema and fail to comprehend as a result of cultural interference.

Based on our experience in teaching EFL to native speakers of Arabic, we believe that translation may be adopted to solve such problems. To translate a text is perhaps to give that text the closest reading possible. The very act of reading closely helps to develop schemata which are appropriate to the target language culture. Translation is an integrative activity which is to say that, like reading, it is a combination of language skills involved in one holistic process, which is a point of strength when arguing the various merits of language activities. The very process of searching out equivalents in two languages draws the learner's attention to problems of culture. Translators have to translate cultures as well as language and the assessment of translation very often turns on how well the cultural element has been transposed.

4. Why Translation?

What we have attempted to do is to point to some of the more serious areas where pragmatic failures can occur. Given that grammatical failures are understood and largely tolerated by native speakers, pragmatic-

failures are generally not.

Tymoczko (1978) argues that translation has been excluded from language learning pedagogy because it is viewed as a strictly semantic expertise defined as: "A sentence in a second language which means the same as the original" (84). Under this conception, a translator begins with sentences which have the meaning in the semantic structure of one language and attempts to construct equivalent sentences by using the semantic devices of the second language. However, as Tymoczko rightly points out; such a strictly semantic view of translation is false. Sperber and Wilson (1986) view communication as a process involving the inferential recognition of the communicator's intention. Translation as a language learning exercise can surely be defended as providing an opportunity to exercise the faculty of inferencing i.e. the transfer of semantic representations into a pragmatic interpretation via inferencing. Sperber and Wilson (ibid) distil the four Grecian Maxims down to one, namely 'Relevance', the importance of the maxim is extended to the very success of an organism at survival. Unless an organism can relate what is new to what is already known and delimit the immense amount of stimulus which surrounds it to that which is relevant, it cannot survive. Translation like language learning involves relating what is new to what is known. Learners, especially beginners, will not be more successful if they forget their NL and think in the foreign language. Whatever that precisely means, they will progress when they relate what parts of the language to be learnt and equate them with what is already known i.e, in this instance, the mother tongue.

Translation exercises can be devised to focus on areas where there are pragmatic gaps between NL and TL. For instance, languages like French and Spanish treat the noun TV as masculine, whereas this feature of gender distinction is absent/neutralized in English. Similarly, the use of specific formulae for particular occasions in Arabic and their absence in similar situations in English could be another useful area where 'consciousness raising' may be encouraged (cf. Rutherford and Smith, 1985).

Faerch and Kasper (1983) described the communication strategies used by language learners when faced with a lexical gap i.e. paraphrase, synonymy, circumlocution... etc. The same strategies are regularly used by translators and a good translator is one who can use these strategies well. The process and activity of translation is the one which develops strategies that are central to communication and it is hard to see why translation should not play a central role in communicative methodology. In discussing formulaic language, Peters (1983) showed how storing large

chunks of language eases processing and this has become an important topic in applied linguistics. We believe that practicing translators also store ready made equivalents for the more common formulae, most of which learners need to know. When learners acquire these equivalents, either as frozen formulae or as patterns with variable slots, they can process communication much more rapidly.

5. Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to shed light on some of the major areas where cross-cultural pragmatic failures occur. Similarly, we have argued that translation may be used as a means of minimizing if not eradicating such failures.

Notes

1. The aim of the project was to compare the way two speech acts, i.e. requests and apologies were realized across a number of languages. The languages investigated thus far include: Hebrew, British English, Israeli English, Australian English, and German.

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