

The case of Oshiwambo-English/English-Oshiwambo translation of informative texts: Is meaning lost in translation?

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the question of whether translators retain the meaning or the correct message from the source language into the target language despite the language differences. Successful translation includes linguistic forms, word selection, sentence structure, cultural features, literal meaning and rhetoric devices. It is of significant importance to translate carefully to maintain the primary meaning of any text. The present research presents the challenges of direct translation in maintaining the meaning of the given contexts. This qualitative study uses a descriptive analysis by examining a few selected texts from Oshiwambo-English and English-Oshiwambo informative texts. The results show that some translation could not maintain the primary meaning of texts due to direct translation. The researchers provided suggestions and corrections for the discovered errors. The study suggests two significant practices; translators to consider the translation in the target language and the context of the source the language.

Keywords: translations, domestication, foreignization, culturally-bound words, figurative language, figurative saying.

Introduction

In Namibia, English is the official language while Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama, which are dialects of Oshiwambo, are some of the mediums of instruction in Namibian schools (Ministry of education and Culture, 1993). The policy further states that English has been an official language for many years, yet many people still do not speak, read nor write English. On the basis that many people do not speak, read, and understand language, several techniques and methods have been

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established to ensure that communications (such as speeches, letters, notices, books) that have been written in English or any other European languages have reached the rest of the public. One of these methods is translation. According to Mu and Wang (2019), the translation aims to convey the same message from the source language into the target language. They further assert that successful translation includes linguistic forms, word selection, sentence structure, cultural features, literal meaning and rhetoric devices. Due to the differences between languages, the target language and the language to be translated, the translation may be handled differently. The main objective of translation should be to deliver the same meaning into the target language without omitting the significant value of the language translated (Mu & Wang, 2019).

Since English, Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama are some of the languages used in Namibian schools, a vast number of teaching and learning materials are translated from English to Oshiwambo and vice versa to suit the need of the learners. Given the fact that language differences play a significant role in translation (Nugroho, 2007), the present research presents the challenges of direct translation in maintaining the meaning of the given contexts.

Significance of the study

The skills and abilities of translation are getting perpetually significant and alluring in today's world. The present multicultural and multilingual society requests effective, efficient, and empathetic communication between languages and cultures. Nugroho (2007) pointed out that that it is significant for a various explanation, for example, empowering worldwide economy, spreading of information and thoughts among others. The business of translation is significant because it empowers successful communication between individuals around the globe. It is likewise regarded as a transporter for the transmission of knowledge, a defender of social legacy or cultural heritage, and fundamental to the advancement of a worldwide economy (Nugroho, 2007). Exceptionally gifted interpreters are vital. In this way, through translation studies such as the present study, experts could be helped with setting up and building up those skills.

This study is important to different domains. Firstly, it can assist lawmakers to produce English texts and translate them into different languages not only in Namibia but also in the entire globe. At schools and universities, teachers, lecturers and national and international examination setters may be equipped with different translation methods and ideas to be employed when translating scripts from English to other languages or vice versa. Furthermore, future compilers of bilingual and multilingual dictionaries can also be equipped with various strategies that would enable them in ensuring that quality translation has prevailed in their dictionaries. Members of the media can also be guided in ensuring that the translation they are engaged in. For instance, translating news from other languages is done successfully and without distorting the meaning. Finally, this study also provides insights to the members of the public when presenting their speeches in various activities (such as church activities, wedding ceremonies, funerals, youth gatherings, and community meetings) that require translation to be carried out successfully.

Literature review and theoretical framework

In a book entitled "The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation", Venuti (2004) adopted the terms "foreignization" and "domestication". These terms include processing the cultural context of the original language. They denote that language is culturally bound and in the translation process, the culture of any language needs to be considered for successful translation.

There is a contradictory relation between foreignization and domestication. Foreignization is essential in the sense that it is the author-of-the-original work orientated (Venuti, 2004). That is, before the translator begins the translation process, he/she approaches the author of the original

text. The translator “tries not to disturb the original author, but to bring the reader to the original author” (Schleiermacher, 2006, p. 229), which in turn helps the readers from facing language and cultural barriers while reading (Venuti, 2004).

According to Venuti (2004), domestication, on the other hand, focuses on the expression way rather than the author of text; the target language’s culture or its readers are the termini of the translation. When it comes to cultural differences, domestication pays more attention to words and expression ways. It considers the cultural features of the target language to accurately translate the primary text and expression ways (Venuti, 2004). When readers of the target language read word translated through domestication, they should be able to accept the expression habits used and the cultural features involved.

This study reviews relevant studies that deal with the translation that prevails between languages, namely interpretation of meaning, language differences as well as types of texts. This study’s theoretical frameworks rest on domestication and foreignization as provided in terms of language differences by Venuti in 2004.

Interpretation of the meaning

Interpretation is not necessarily translation although the two only differ in the medium. When interpreting, which is done orally, the meaning conveyed may be affected by fillers and the tone of the speaker. The interpretation of meaning goes beyond written/spoken words; a sentence may be open to many interpretations depending on several aspects. According to Polkinghorne (2005), people use narratives and metaphors to explore the richness of experience in languages. Metaphors are language-specific and they tend to differ from culture to culture (Lackoff & Johnson, cited in Van Nes, Abna, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). For example, in Oshiwambo, a common saying that compares someone to something ‘S/He is a jackal’ (*Ye okavandje*) to compare how smart and sneaky someone is. This expression may not be easily comprehended by English native speakers. This is in keeping with Van Nes et al. (2010) whose study pointed out that meaning can be lost in the translation process. This shows that the direct translation from English to Oshiwambo and vice versa could also allow the meaning to get lost in translation which is the focus of the present study. Additionally, some of the metaphors’ meaning from Oshiwambo are analyzed.

Language differences

Challenges of translation may be inevitable. Ngodji (2004) believes that in Oshiwambo history of translation, one of the early challenges in translation includes the challenges of translating the English Holy Bible to Oshikwanyama and Oshindonga in the early 1950s. He additionally asserts that since language comes with culture, it is important to make sure that the translation takes into account the culture of the language being translated to maintain the intended meaning. It is also challenging to translate quotes, which are mostly used in qualitative studies, because they may have concepts with culturally-bound words (Van Nes, et al., 2010). It is explicable that the cultural difference contributes to the translation. If two languages share a close relationship culturally, the translation may not pose many challenges. The present paper looks at the Oshiwambo and English culture in translation which, for many years, has presented challenges. For example, the proverb: *Nekwa litoka oye ngaho nyoko* ‘Your mother remains your mother, regardless of anything’ may not carry the exact meaning in English because it is culturally orientated. However, the translation given in English has only achieved a certain level of meaning, but the native speaker of Oshiwambo may not appreciate the meaning. In this article, the translations of Oshiwambo proverbs are examined.

If close attention is not paid to accurate translation, it would be similar to the popular game Broken telephone'. Over the line, individuals tend to say how they think they have heard which results in loss of meaning (Van Nes, et al. 2010). Similarly, in research, the meaning is transferred from one phase to another. Therefore, there is a need to take into account the language differences and cultural differences when translating from one language to another. According to Mu and Wang (2019), one of the translator's translation agency choice is a cultural orientated plan. Translators sometimes tend some cultures to remove or point out the linguistic and cultural differences of original texts. This choice could pose a challenge of inaccurate translation because separating culture from language will result in meaning loss, which is the focus of this pivotal study. Venuti's book accounts for two significant different cultural tendencies which are: domestication and foreignization. For the interest of the present paper, both foreignization and domestication are of focus. Venuti (2004) defined this as a way of approaching an author of the original work in translation. Schleiermacher (2006) puts it that, "The translator -tries not to disturb the original author, but to bring the reader to the original author" (p. 229), while domestication brings the reader to the writer. Therefore, it should be the objective of every translator to try to retain the literary, linguistic and cultural features of the original work and the striking flavour.

On the contrary, Ngodji (2004) stated that the domestication approach was employed in the early 80's to translate the English Bible into Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama which are dialects of Oshiwambo by foreign missionaries. Although this has faced some challenges as mentioned earlier, the missionaries were more interested in translating the words with the cultural features of the target language (Ngodji, 2004). He further pointed out that indigenous translators have been overlooked, and the successful translation of the Oshiwambo bible is linked to them. The cultural meaning and linguistics features of Oshiwambo in that translation were achieved through domestication approach which puts more emphasis on cultural features when dealing with cultural differences (Mu & Wang, 2019).

Types of texts

The kinds of texts that can be submitted are classified into three types: expressive, informative and operative (Abdelaa & Alazzawie, 2020). The expressive texts are the texts that appreciate beauty. This means that when translating these kinds of text, careful attention to form and rhythm is needed. Example of expressive texts include literature, political blogs and personal essays. Informative texts transfer information, knowledge and opinions. In these texts, the main focus of communication is the topic. An example of these texts is scientific articles and news. The operative texts intend to persuade someone to do something. Example of an operative text is an advertisement (Abdelaa & Alazzawie, 2020). Among these three types of texts, the informative texts are easier to translate, compared to other kinds of texts, which are the focus of this article.

Methodology

According to Aliaga and Gunderson (2006), a qualitative method makes use of words or language, pictures or photographs and observations in describing and analyzing of the data. In addition, they explained that qualitative analysis results in rich data that provides an in-depth understanding or picture, and it is particularly significant when it comes to exploring how and why things have occurred.

The methods of analysis used in this study are descriptive and text analyses. The descriptive analysis was used to examine the clinic notice notes and Oshiwambo informative texts, analyzed them, identify errors and provide suggestions and corrections for the discovered errors. The researchers used the book '*Omishe di dule eyovi*' by P Hasheela, because it has cultural translation of Oshiwambo proverbs and a hospital notice from the clinic in Windhoek, because of the purpose of this text. The researchers then analysed the content of the texts, word by word

and the meaning in context to see how well translation was done. Every word that seemed to add, subtract or twist the meaning of the translated work was analyzed in isolation.

Text analysis refers to a type of methodology used in research for description and interpretation of the contents, structures, as well as the functions of the messages that are contained in texts (Pumilia-Gnarini, Favaron, Pacetti, Bishop & Guerra, 2013). To have a good understanding of a text, whether by a human being or by a computer, means that units of meanings are identified in the text and that rules dominating these units and the corresponding meaning units provide the final and complete text meaning (Gross, 1990). In other words, text analysis is an analysis or scrutiny of the text conducted by the researcher, looking at what he or she reads in the text. He reads the content of the text in depth instead of just reading the text superficially.

Findings

In this section, translated Oshiwambo proverbs to English and their figurative meanings of these proverbs are presented. Followed by the hospital notice and its translation into Oshiwambo. The errors were identified from this text and suggestions are presented. Lastly, the table with Oshiwambo analyzed words that bear more than one meaning are presented.

Translated work from Oshiwambo to English and from English to Oshiwambo

A book of Oshiwambo proverbs by Hasheela (1986) titled '*Omishe di dule eyovi*' is a great example of direct translation from Oshiwambo to English. Proverbs carry the culture of a language; they reflect the cultural values and norms of any particular language. Ngodji (2004) puts it this way: language is bound to culture and the meaning is within the culture. In this book of proverbs, the literal translation is also done, but not subordinate to figurative meaning. Literalness is defined by Md Zamin and Abu Hasa (2018) as a way of performing "a direct translation, thus resulting in an awkward or unnatural rendition" (p.18). The word-by-word translation that was made in some cases of this book has somehow distorted the meaning; some proverbs would not carry the cultural meaning they intend to address. In other words, a non-native of Oshiwambo would get a different interpretation of some of these proverbs. For example:

Translation A

1. Oikwatakwata ohai nyika edilo – 'Something being touched often becomes dirty.'
2. Odula ohai teelwa mepya:ondjala ohai teelwa meumbo – 'Rain is to be waited for in the garden: hunger is to be waited for in the house.'
3. Nima iha tila omuti ine u londa – 'X does not fear a tree he has not climbed.'
4. Kape na shikangwa shi ha li ombiya – 'There is no potsherd not having been a pot once.'
5. Kunde iha likolwa kunhanga – 'Beans are not picked from a melon plant'
6. Nima okavale kopeendjila – 'X is a palm bush at the road'
7. Nima okwe mu ya meyoo – 'X went into his tooth.'

Interestingly, the author of this book took the liberty to provide the figurative meanings of these proverbs to help convey the cultural meaning of these proverbs. In doing so, the cultural and literary meaning of these proverbs were not lost, this is domestication. For example:

Translation B

1. Oikwatakwata ohai nyika edilo – 'Do not trudge along, do what you have to do'
2. Odula ohai teelwa mepya:ondjala ohai teelwa meumbo – 'Get up and work, stop sleeping'
3. Nima iha tila omuti ine u londa – 'X is not scared of anything'
4. Kape na shikangwa shi ha li ombiya – 'The elders were once young'
5. Kunde iha likolwa kunhanga – 'Do not expect good habits from a bad person'

6. Nima okavale kopeendjila – ‘X is two-faced ‘
7. Nima okwe mu ya meyoo – ‘X got on her/his nerves’

With the translation in **B**, the meanings could be understood better by both natives and non-natives of Oshiwambo because the cultural meaning is maintained. In an English-Chinese translation study, it was pointed out that “translation is not only a process of interlingual transformation but also the one of cultural transfer” (Mu and Wang, 2019, p. 1308).

Translated work from Source language English to Oshiwambo

The following passage was taken from a clinic notice board in Windhoek, Namibia. It was translated into Oshiwambo:

Dear: Clients/Patients

*You are hereby being notified that the following services will be integrated as from Monday the 18th of March 2019. The services are as follow the screening, family planning, dressing and parameters. Clients will be sitting in one line from reception and will receive al services they require that day in one room except for the medications after treatment, Pediatric, Immunization, ANC and doctors will remain the way they are till further notice
Order by management*

(Hospital notice, 2019-A)

Translated version into target language: Oshiwambo

Aavu aasimanekwa

Otamu tyesithilwa nesimaneko kutya omayakulo taga landula. Otaga kala haga yakulilwa mumwe okuza momaandaha, eti 18/03/2019.

Omayakulo ngaashi:

-Aavu mboka taya ehama

-lingambekitho yolualo (family planning)

-Okumangulula iilalo

-Okupupwa (BP, Temperature)

Aavu otayakuutumba momkweyo gumwe okuza pomafutulo nokumona omayakulo ngoka ya pumbwa okuza mondunda yimwe, kakele komiti ngele wa yakulwa komupangi. Uunona, etuntilo, omathulo, noondohotola otadhi kala ngaashi shito.

Tangi kelongelo kumwe.

Okuza kelelo lyoshipangelo.

(Hospital notice, 2019-B)

The translation of the (*Hospital notice, 2019-B*) may not be the complete translation from English, but the audience of the target language may be familiar with most of the words, given the frequent exposure to some of the employed words. Md Zamin and Abu Hasa (2018) urge that the translation should be the exact information in the original text and should carry fluency and correctness as far as structure is concerned. However, the lexical translation in (*Hospital notice, 2019-B*) has somehow contributed to the loss of meaning of the original text. The translation errors may contribute so much to the meaning of the text being translated. Al Hassan (2013) pointed out that the problems in translations do not only revolve around lexical content and system, but also the ways of life in a given culture, values and ideologies.

The following phrases/words/sentences slightly lost their meaning from the source language (English) to the target language (Oshiwambo). For meaning to be lost in translation, the translator should have committed one of the translation errors (Md Zamin & Abu Hasa, 2018). The translation errors are Faithfulness, Addition, Omission, Literalness, Aaux Ami, Word form/Part of speech, Syntax, and Usage. Some of the definitions of these terms are given in relevance to the translated texts. Example of these errors in translation:

1. *Screening* – ‘Aavu mboka taya ehama’
2. *Dressing* – ‘Okumangulula iilalo’
3. *Pediatric* – ‘Uunona’
4. ‘Tangi kelongelo kumwe’

In (1), the word *screening* is translated as ‘sick people’ in the target language, whereas the word *screening* defined by Cambridge online dictionary as “a test or examination to discover if there is anything wrong with someone.” This is the Faux Ami error; translator confuses words that are similar in form but have different meanings or contexts of usage (Md Zamin and Abu Hasa, 2018). For an Oshiwambo native speaker, the translation in (1) has double/repetitive meaning:

Aavu	mboka	taya ehama
Sick people	D-pro	sick
‘Sick people who are sick’		

When translating the word ‘screening’, the meaning is not maintained because of the error committed by the translator so the meaning was lost. Similarly, Van Nes, et al. (2010) highlights that during the translation process, meaning may get lost.

In (2), the word *dressing* is translated as to ‘uncover wounds’ in the target language. Although this translation could be understood by non-English speakers, it does not carry the complete meaning of the word. The other part of the word *dressing* which is to cover a wound is not translated and this is the Faux Ami error.

The last word in (3) translated as ‘uunona’ as in ‘children’ does not denote the precise meaning of the original word (*pediatric*). According to the Cambridge dictionary, *pediatric* is parenting and caring for children. The translator has taken the keyword *children* ‘uunona’ from the definition and used it as the equivalent translation. This is omitting other information that seems unimportant to make a partial translation.

The sentence in (4) ‘*Tangi kelongelo kumwe.*’ Translated as ‘thank you for your co-operation’ is not in the original text. Something was added to the meaning of the text. Md Zamin and Abu Hasa (2018) refer to this translating error as ‘addition’. Clearly, not only does meaning gets lost in translation, but also can be added or modified as it was done in the quote in the question.

About ‘Tangi kelongelokumwe’, it is also observed that the first word in the sentence ‘Tangi’ is basically a loan word, that is to say, it is not an Oshiwambo word, but an Afrikaans word ‘dankie’. However, this word is now accepted into the language and it is synonym to ‘iyaloo’. The word ‘iyaloo’ in Oshiwambo expresses gratitude and it is a bit formal and authentic compared to ‘tangi’.

Suggestions to these translations

The suggested/correct translations:

1. *Screening* – ‘Okutala/okututsa mboka taya ehama nege ye na omikithi’ - *Checking who is sick or with any disease.*
2. *Pediatric* – ‘iinima ya pamba aanona/iipambeke yaanona’- Caring for children

Although these translations are a bit equivalent compared to the translation in the target language used in the original text, the translation should not only be aiming at achieving equivalency in translation but rather serve the correct function in the target language to convey the intended message.

One word, many translations

In a radio interview, Mbenzi and Shikesho (2019) pointed out that the English word ‘congratulation’ can be translated differently based of the occasion it is used (P. A. Mbenzi & E. T. Shikesho, personal communication, August 20, 2019). Their assertion supports that of Mu and Wang (2019), that when dealing with cultural differences, the focus should be placed on cultural features. In this instance, the word congratulation is given a translation based on the cultural practice being dealt with.

Table 1.

Different translation of the English word “congratulations” at various situations

	“Congratulations” At a wedding party	“Congratulations” When someone has a baby	“Congratulations” At a celebratory ceremony
Oshiwambo	1. Olye e ku hongga eendunge dokuanduka mefuta mangha vakweni tava file mo?	1. Ino ka xwika 2. Oshike she tu eta...oludalo.	1. Owa ninga nawa shili.
Word by word translation in English	1. Who taught you to be this smart to escape the sea leaving others?	1. Do not burn her/him (the baby) 2. What brought us...children	1. You did well indeed.

At a wedding party, Oshiwambo speakers may say ‘*Olye e ku hongga eendunge dokuanduka mefuta mangha vakweni tava file mo?*’ to mean congratulation. Also, when someone gives birth, speakers may say ‘*Ino ka xwika / Oshike she tu eta...oludalo.*’ to refer to congratulation and when they are celebrating something, which may include wedding ceremonies, they may use ‘*Owa ninga nawa shili.*’ What is very important to stress here is that, translators should be very careful when translating texts from the source language to the target language, as contexts are of prime importance and should be considered

Conclusion

The goals of translation at hand may determine the kinds of translating approach to be used. Domestication and foreignization approaches should not be ignored completely. Language differences require translators to pay attention to linguistic forms, word selection, sentence structure, cultural features, literal meaning and rhetoric devices to retain the original meaning of any text. Bases on cultural features, it is explicable that the cultural difference contributes to the translation. That is, if two languages share a close relationship culturally, the translation may not pose many challenges that is why it is generally recommended to employ both the foreignization and domestication processes. However, the type of texts being translated may require a different approach due to language use in those particular texts. The informative texts, which were of focus in the present study are reportedly the easiest to translate compared to the other kinds of texts and therefore the Linguistics components to consider when translating them were highlighted. Although both foreignization and domestication are significant in a translation process, the domestication approach maintains both original meaning and the cultural aspect of the primary text. It focuses on the expression way rather than the author of text; the target language's culture or its readers are the termini of the translation. When it comes to cultural differences, domestication pays more attention to words and expression ways. This approach is therefore recommended because it considers the cultural features of the target language to accurately translate the primary text and expression ways. By using this approach, translators will be able to maintain the primary meaning and the culture when they translate into target languages. Since the present study covered informative texts, future researchers could study on single words translation to see if the cultural meaning can be maintained. It would also be interesting for future researchers to look at linguistics features that affect translations.

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