Back-Translation as a Quality Control Mechanism in Sesotho Translation

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ABSTRACT Researchers in translation are most of the time quality conscious and aspire to determine the accuracy of the translated meaning as the source text (ST). They perceive back-translation as a reliable quality assurance mechanism. However, some of the clients maintain that back-translation is not an effective and efficient quality control mechanism. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to determine whether back-translation is a reliable quality control mechanism between the source text and the target text (TT). The researcher applies a hermeneutic phenomenological research method within the qualitative paradigm to amplify the findings in this study. The research techniques involve the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. The operative principle will be that both the first and the second forward translations will be reconciled to gather the *prima facie* evidence justifying the accuracy of back-translation. The results reflect *ipso facto* that if there is a flaw in a reconciled translation, there will be a flaw in the accuracy of a back-translation. Back-translation is dependent on the forward translation to determine the accuracy of translation. The results also reflect that back-translation lacks originality and creativity. The study concludes that though back-translation is commonly intended to determine ST-TT accuracy, it something fails to do so as back-translators are not the custodians and the first language speakers of the source language. The implications are that less research has been done on back-translation. The limitations of back-translation are that back-translation is commonly dependent on the forward translation and tend to be restricted to effectively determine the accuracy.

INTRODUCTION

Translation commissioners are much quality conscious and are keen to ascertain whether the translated text conveys the exact meaning as per its original counterpart. They want to establish whether the translation has been done accurately according to the translation brief or whether it communicates a different meaning which was not intended. Emanating from the work of Brislin (1986), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other international medical research and treatment organisations have seen back-translation as a highly useful device in translating international questions and surveys, as well as diagnostic and research instruments.

As a matter of necessity, medical organisations, led by *WHO* have taken a particular interest in back-translation as a quality control mechanism. The idea is still to achieve accuracy of meanings across languages within the medical field. Many scholars took a position that the only way to confirm the element of precision and accuracy between the original source text and the target text, is to get the target text translated back into the source language because in this way they can compare the translated text with the original one and hence determine the discrepancies and shortcomings between the two languages.

Back-translation is defined by various scholars. Pym (2010) confirms that back-translation is when a translated document is translated (back) into the original language. The idea is that the author can then verify whether the translation covers all aspects of the original.

The researcher investigates the future prospects of Sesotho translation regarding the use of back-translation as quality control mechanism. Different views by different scholars have been propounded regarding the effectiveness of back-translation as quality assurance mechanism. While some scholars are positive about back-translation, on the other side of the coin, there are other scholars and readers who maintain a different view regarding the effectiveness of back-translation in determining the accuracy of the target text in relation to the original source text. Yasaman et al. (2013: 43) states that:

"Back-translation is a common technique to assess the accuracy of translation, but its application in different contexts is often subject to controversy."

It is for this purpose that the researcher discusses the controversy of opinions among scholars. On the negative side of the controversy, Vitray (2007: 13) maintains the view that:

"A back-translation will not result in a text that is identical to the source text, and furthermore, a back-translation is not necessarily a good indicator of the quality of the translation."

Another criticism levelled at the effectiveness and the validation of back-translation is postulated by Paegelow (2008: 12) who also maintains that:

"The unpopularity of the back-translation to quality assurance is reflected in the ASTM translation standard as ... back-translations are no guarantee of accuracy."

As a matter of argument, such readers unreservedly accept that back-translation should be complemented with other possible translation mechanisms to fully determine the accuracy of the translation to its source text counterpart.

Despite the specified controversy of opinions among translation scholars, back-translation has to be researched broadly as it appears to be an appropriate and practical method of identifying the errors in the translated text. It is also important to establish the possibilities of success in the application of back-translation as a quality control mechanism.

On the positive side of the controversy, for Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) back-translation is primarily contextual. It is a fact of history and a product of the target culture, linguistic correspondence between languages, or judged with respect to universal standards of quality and accuracy. This information is also important for the researcher to build up the argument underlying this work.

Based on all the various scholarly views advanced on back-translation, the research intends to present the following hypotheses with a view to keep this work in focus and proper direction:

This study aims to 'unpack' the value of the phenomenon 'back-translation' and to determine its future research implications on the Sesotho translation through the following formulated hypotheses. By responding to the following question, the researcher targets the value of back-translation.

The research question: Does a reconciled forward translation ensures quality in a back-translation?

The researcher is of the opinion that if the above questions can be comprehensively and appropriately responded to, then the virtues of back-translation as a quality assurance mechanism would be expressed.

Aim of the Study

Languages are not isomorphic and therefore translation has pressing challenges if it has to operate on one-to-one basis across languages. This means that what goes in the source language text cannot be completely matched by what comes out the target language text. The two languages are not the same. The rate of development of the two languages is not even the same. The aim of the present paper is to put to test back-translation as a quality control mechanism. The prime idea is to create a room for the production of quality translations in Sesotho languages.

House (1981) wants a translation to function as the equivalent of its source text in a different culture or situation, but she also wants the translation to use equivalent pragmatic means to achieve this functional equivalence. In her definition of translation the key concept is still equivalence. She subsequently developed a model to assess the quality of translated texts, using the source text as the norm.

However, the researcher is aware of the problems that translators may encounter due to language differences. On this particular issue, Ozolins (2008) maintains that the language differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) may have reference on the availability of terminology between the source text and the target text. Ozolins (2008: 34) contends further that:

"In doing back-translation, there will always be a dilemma in choosing the words when the difference is very subtle, such as mild and moderate, strong and severe as these words may be used in the same context."

It is important to undertake a research of this nature as scholars advance conflicting views to signify their understanding of back-translation as a phenomenal quality assurance tool. It is therefore no wonder that Gutt (1991) refutes against applying the term equivalence to translations at all and demonstrate that equivalence cannot be automatically equated with quality. It is unequivocally important to determine wheth-

er back-translation can serve as a mechanism that can stand the test of time to ensure quality and also elicit conceptual equivalence in the Sesotho translation.

Literature Review

Back-translation is applied in many fields of life. In some cases, it appears to produce successfully. In some cases, it does not function effectively. The researcher focuses on other research works based on back-translation.

In the medical field, for instance, the World Health Organisation (WHO) released a statement that the world of medical research has adopted back-translation as an almost unique translation review method, which is hardly ever used in other sectors. This implies that back-translation is predominantly used in the medical field. However, it is also used in the legal as well as the technological fields.

Many scholars emphasise on the introduction of the back translator in the translation process. The role of back translator serves as one dimension that has either has the pros and cons in rendering a meaningful and qualitative translation. Pym (2010: 30) describes the role of the back translator that it tends to signify limitations. However, some scholars still maintain that by comparing the back translated text with the original source text, the researcher may have a better qualitative perspective of the implied translation. Pym (2010: 30) defines and categorically states the process of back-translation as:

"Taking the translation and rendering it back into the source-language, then comparing the two source-language versions."

Lin (2005: 64) moves from the premise that the effectiveness of the application of back-translation may not be absolute. There are aspects such as culture and language differences to be considered.

"There are numerous studies that have been conducted in the field of sport based on adapted or translated instrument across countries. However, using an adopted or translated instrument does not ensure that the adopted or translated one measures the same constructs as the original one does as a result of the cultural and lingual differences."

The present study reflects the basis of acceptance or non-acceptance of back-translation as quality assurance mechanism. Therefore, researchers who prefer to adapt or translate an instrument from English version into a different language version should be cognisant of such potential problems.

METHODS TO BE APPLIED

The researcher decides to apply a hermeneutic phenomenological approach within the qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative analysis of data will be suitable and comprehensive enough to collect, analyse and interpret the results in this work. Unlike the quantitative research method that deals only with numbers or statistical analysis of the frequencies of occurrences, the qualitative paradigm will be functional to explain how, when and why there has been phenomena to be investigated.

As a matter of principle, the researcher will apply the method in dealing with the formulated hypothesis. There are other considerations (as in the following paragraph) that will be taken into cognisance in responding to the formulated hypothesis.

One of the basic prior to the textual analysis, the researcher applies the method that becomes functional to reflect the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of back-translation in Sesotho translation. For this purpose, the researcher developed a method by posing questions that would guide and maintain focus in this paper.

Translation is not solely concerned with translating meaning. Some translations may be aimed to convey sound effects or emotional effects; others focus on conveying factual information or communicative intention. The selected method, namely the phenomenological method within the qualitative paradigm will be crucial to collect, analyse and interpret the data.

Van Leuven-Zwart (1962: 43) is of the opinion that texts are perceived within a functional theoretical framework:

"… no longer as independent linguistic utterances, but rather as part of the socio-culture to which they belong. Translation therefore becomes a communication activity in which function of the translated text in the target culture is given priority."

Andriesen (2006) alludes to the fact that the blind back-translation technique is frequently used to verify the accuracy of translation. In line with the hypothesis formulated, the researcher prefers to adopt a simple three steps

technique, namely, the forward-backward-for-ward technique. In the first step, the two forward translators are given an opportunity to translate the original source text.

The second step focuses on the relationship between the two formulated target texts. The aim is to reconciled them or consolidate them into one meaningful forward translation. The basic purpose of undertaking these steps is to make sure that the product is of quality. This is the reason Arrojo (2007: 74) confirms this view in proposing that:

"The reason why the quality of medical translation and interpreting is so emphasised is the fact that a translation error may trigger severe clinical consequences."

Based on the above assertion as background, the researcher intends to follow the same pattern of reconciling the two forward translations and establishing whether there would be a significant change in terms of quality when back translated.

Operationalisation

In operationalizing the selected method when dealing with the formulated hypothesis, the researcher observes other postulations by other scholars about back-translation. The premise from which the researcher moves is based on the contention expressed by Grunwald, *et al*, (2006) that back-translation has specific short-comings. Back-translation, in terms of Grunwald et al. (2006: 33) is incapacitated to reflect on the nuances and language styles.

"Translation process is more than replacing words with the words in the other language. Often the same meaning needs to be expressed using different words, which a back-translation will not reflect ..."

Based on the selected qualitative phenomenological method to be applied, the idea in this study is not to determine a mere equivalence between the source text and the target text, but to enhance the relevance of back-translation in the assurance of quality in the English-Sesotho translation. The data reflected in the following paragraphs has been collected. It will be analysed and interpreted within the qualitative research method.

As part of the comments in the application of back-translation, the researcher determines the relevance to the message, the availability of terminology and the coherence of the text.

Example 1

Step One: Identifying the Source Text

Source Text

"When answering the e-Diary questions, select an answer that best describes your asthma medication use and symptoms during the past 24 hours."

Step Two : Determining the Reconciled Forward Translation

Reconciled Forward Translation (RFT)

By reconciled forward translation the researcher mean the ultimate or the resultant translation between the first and the second forward translations.

Ha o araba dipotso tsa e-Diary, kgetha karabo e hlalosang hantle ka ho fetisisa tshebediso ya hao ya meriana ya letshwea (asthma) nakong ya dihora tse 24 tse fetileng.

Step Three: Comparing the Two Back-Translations with the Source Text

First Back-Translation (BT1)

"To answer the e-Diary question, choose an answer that best describes your use of asthma medicines during the past 24 hours"

Second Back-Translation (BT2)

"When you answer the e-Diary questions, choose an answer that best describes how you took your asthma medication during the last 24 hours".

Step Four: Comments

There is a discrepancy and lack consistency in the selection of words between the first back-translation and the second back-translation.

It is at the stage of comparing the first back-translation (BT1) and the second back-translation (BT2) where we realise the difficulty and the lack of absoluteness of back-translation.

"When answering the e-Diary questions ..." (BT2) versus

"To answer the e-Diary question ..." (BT1)

The researcher notes also the difference in the above expressions:

"Plurality (questions - in e-Diary questions)" (BT2) versus
"Singularity (question – in e-Diary question)" (BT1)

The inconsistency in terms of the dictates of the source text is apparent. Therefore it becomes an absolute compromise of the textual meaning.

Example 2

Step One: Identifying the Source Text

Source Text

"The medications listed on your Asthma Medications List are the ones you should refer to when answering the e-Diary questions."

Step Two: Determining the Reconciled Forward Translation

Reconciled Forward Translation

"Meriana e hlahang Lenaneng la Meriana ya hao ya Letshwea ke yona eo o lokelang ho e tadima ha o araba dipotso tsa e-Diary"

Step Three: Comparing the Two Back-Translations with the Source Text

First Back-Translation (BT1)

"The medicines that appear in your Medication List are the ones that you should refer to when you answer the e-Diary questions"

Second Back-Translation (BT2)

"Medication that appears on your Asthma Medication List are the ones that you must look at when you answer the e-Diary questions"

Step Four: Comments

Choice of words reflects inconsistency:
Example: In the first back-translation (BT1) the translator uses *"The medicines …"* but in the second back-translation (BT2) the researcher prefers to phrase it as: *"Medication …"*

The researcher uses words with appropriate meaning in the first back-translation (BT1) as in *"should refer to …"*. We realise that these words are of a lower perlocutionary force semantically, whereas in BT2 the researcher tends to use words of a higher perlocutionary force as in *"must look …"*. It is incumbent upon the translator to try to retain the language that discharges the same perlocutionary force in terms of meaning as in the given source text.

Example 3

Step One: Identifing the Source Text

Source Text (ST)

"Medication that appears on your Asthma Medication List are the ones that you must look at when you answer the e-Diary questions"

Step Two: Determining the Reconciled Forward Translation (RFT)

Reconciled Forward Translation (RFT)

"Ke ka makgetlo a makae o bileng le matshwao a letshweya (asthma) kajeno?"

Step Three : Comparing the Two Back-Translations with the Source Text

First Back-Translation (BT1)

"How many times did you have signs of asthma today?"

Second Back-Translation *(BT2)*

"How often did you have asthma symptoms today?"

Step Four: Comments

The first back-translation is presented as: *"How many times …"* whereas the second back-translation is presented as: *"How often …"*. The Sesotho back-translator should be experienced enough to mark conceptual equivalence semantically.

Example 4

Step One: Identifying the Source Text

Source Text (ST)

"Inhale fully, then place mouthpiece in your mouth and blow out as hard and fast as you can for at least 2 seconds."

Step Two: Determining the Reconciled orward Translation

Reconciled Forward Translation (RFT)

"*Phefumoloha haholo, beha sesebediswa molomong mme o butswelle ka ntle ka matla a maholo le ka potlako ka moo o ka kgonang ka teng bonyane metsotswana e 2.*"

Step Three: Comparing the Two Back-Translations with the Source Text

First Back-Translation (BT1)

"*Inhale deeply, put the device in your mouth and breathe out strongly and quickly as much as you can at least for 2 seconds.*"

Second Back-Translation (BT2)

"*Breathe a lot, put a device on your mouth and blow very hard externally and as fast you can at least for 2 seconds.*"

Step Four: Comments

The first back-translation (BT1) is more relevant to the source text than the second back-translation (BT2) in terms of choice of words as well as word order.

Formulation of back-translation may be wrong and the source text author may not be able to identify errors.

In all these examples, the reconciled forward translation (RFT) has been brought up and will appear to depict some changes in the interpretation of the translation process.

Example: In African languages, Sesotho language in particular,

Where English prefers to use trial, Sesotho prefers to use test.

English and Sesotho are different languages in terms of development, language style and the nuances of the two languages. The Sesotho term *"teko"* may either mean *"test"* or *"trial"* in English. This happens quite often in the medical field, and, as such, it complicates the interpretation and the entire meaning of the intended medical activities.

RESULTS

The impression about back-translation, when evaluated as a method of establishing and determining quality in translation is that it is rather a time consuming process. This is so because both the forward translations and the back-translations have to be reconciled; after which, the resultant should be compared with the source text. It may also be a costly enterprise in the sense that the forward and back translators have to be paid.

Access to the Original English Source Text

The back translator has no access to the source text. It therefore implies that he can produce any version in terms of his interpretation based on his experience in translation.

Language Differences between English and Sesotho – Word Order

Culture is infused in language. The two are inseparable. This complicates the translation process for back-translation to be meaningful in determining the quality of translation. Finally, item response theory (IRT) applied to a variety of translated tests offers the possibility for cross-cultural researchers to solve the problem of measurement non-equivalence as well as to discover the cultural and/or lingual differences (Ellis 1989).

Dependency of the Back-Translation on the First Translation

The results in this work reflect that back-translation is dependent on the reconciled forward translation. This implies that any error in the back-translation has an influence on the final product. This implies that the first forward as well as the second forward translation should be well-structured so as to give shape to the ultimate back-translation from which the final product will be derived.

Meaning Lost in Translation

The biggest problem with using back-translation in order to judge accuracy is that as a native speaker of the target language, while it may be deduced that the meaning of an incorrectly or literally translated source text, a monolingual native speaker of the source language may not understand the text at all. Thus it is possible for the back-translation to "match" the original document, but still be incomprehensible or inaccurate to its intended readers.

Cultural Differences Observed in Back-Translation?

Once the English source text is translated to Sesotho, then the translation is now embedded within the Sesotho culture. It is then transformed into a Sesotho text that characterises itself within the Sesotho cultural context. Translation is not void from its relevant cultural context.

The Expertise of the Back Translator

The Sesotho cultural context, within which the translation is based, makes it difficult for the back-translator to produce the same translated text as in the source text. It is a matter that is dependent and controlled by cultural differences.

Back-Translations Are Too Costly – They Are Not Cost-Effective

On the surface, a back-translation seems like a good idea. In fact, many academicians endorse the concept. But in the real world, back-translations create additional costs and often do more harm than good. The fundamental back-translation process is so sophisticated and complex that it opens a room for many people to participate. Participation goes with a fee and as a result it sometimes causes translators not to go their jobs very well.

Back-Translation Focus on Meaning More than the Linguistic Structure

Second, a translation may contain no spelling or grammatical errors and still be a poor translation. The *"look and feel"* of a translation is just as important as the mechanical aspects of correct spelling and grammar. The right choice of words and phrases, as well as their order, can make all the difference in how a translation will be received by the target audience. Again, back-translations fall short as an evaluation tool.

Back-Translation Should Not Necessarily Go Word for Word Otherwise it Compromises the Language and the Cultural Phenomena

Since word order is quite different in other languages, a "word-for-word" (or "phrase by phrase") back-translation may lead the client to believe that the translation itself is awkward when actually it is not.

Change of Words and Phrases

The clients reorder the words in a back-translation with instructions to change the translation accordingly. The results: What was a good translation gets needlessly reordered, and then winds up sounding quite clumsy. Third, a back-translation encourages suggestions that have no bearing on translation quality. For example, a health-related English document might contain the word "doctor."

DISCUSSION

Back-translation as a checking tool has been effectively and efficiently applied for many years. However, it has certain inherent limitations. Firstly, back-translation works best when the languages and cultures involved are very close. Differences in language developments for different languages within the language combination, for example, English and Sesotho culminates in discrepancies. Number of words between the two languages in a language combination shows that words in one language may not have exact equivalents in the other.

Back-translation is dependent upon the quality and accuracy of the translated text to a great extent as any mistake on the part of translator would definitely reflect in the work of back translator as he is just following the translated text. In other words the role of the back translator is restricted and only confined to following the translated text. This sometimes creates problems because the client is usually ignorant of the language in which the text was translated but he enjoys good command over the source language.

The source text author or source language speaker cannot detect errors in the translated text. The translator simply finds faults in the work of back translator who is just following someone and is almost blind in respect of the actual meaning to be conveyed. The problem is that the back translator is not given the original source text. In this way, the back translator sometimes suffers for none of his fault and it becomes very difficult for him to convince the client that he is almost helpless in such a situation.

The back translators use a second language in which they do not have enough competence. They do not use their own original language. In this way, the translator battles to find the nuances or the meaning in English.

Example: In African languages, Sesotho language in particular,

Where English prefers to use **trial,** Sesotho prefers to use **test.**

Back-translation has only a limited value. If the back-translation is faithful to the original, the first translation is correct. If that is not the case, there are two alternatives; namely, the first forward translation is incorrect, or the back translator has not done his work properly.

Back-translations are of dubious value. Firstly, it is almost impossible for the back translator to guess the style of the original writer. Secondly, original documents could have been poorly written in the first place, that is, first forward translation, and the translations fixed the problem.

Clients Have to Pay Two Translations to Make Sure the Job is Done Properly

Back-translation *"is a translation of a translated text back into the language of the original text, made without reference to the original text"*. Comparison of a back-translation with the original text is sometimes used as a check on the accuracy of the original translation, much as the accuracy of a mathematical operation is sometimes checked by reversing the operation. But the results of such reverse-translation operations, while useful as approximate checks, are not always precisely reliable. Back-translation must in general be less accurate than back-calculation because linguistic symbols (words) are often ambiguous, whereas mathematical symbols are intentionally unequivocal.

CONCLUSION

The language differences that bring about discrepancies in back-translation are the apparent discrepancies in using singular or plural; discrepancies in the use of genre indicators; abbreviations; word order in a sentence structure and acronyms.

Translation is not only a linguistic transference but also, of importance, a cultural transference. This principle seems to be compromised

in the application of back-translation. The problem with back-translation is that it presents an entirely new translator who does not have any idea about the original source text. The new translator will come with his/her own perspective and would like his version to be taken as the most correct one and the most reliable.ne

Cross-cultural studies have caught researchers' attention for decades. Translations of instruments are an inevitable tool to conduct such studies. However, literal translation does not ensure that the translated instrument measures the same constructs as in the original instrument. The reason is that there may exist lingual or cultural or both differences across samples. Therefore, cross-cultural researchers should be cognizant of the numerous potential problems, such as construct, method, and item bias that could affect the results of studies.

A good translation is characterised as a translation with very few errors or not having errors at all. Back-translation is commonly endowed with errors as influenced by misinterpretation of cultural aspects by the back translator.

While many scholars adopted a principle that back-translation should be based on one forward translation, the researcher believes strongly that a reconciled forward translation would be ideal. The first and the second forward translations would be ideal to express quality in back-translation.

The study has also demonstrated the limitations of back-translation by pinpointing the use of a single forward translation in constructing a back-translation. In other words, instead of a back-translation, a reconciled Sesotho translation could be taken as the authenticated and final product. In fact, the researcher believes that one single back-translated Sesotho text may possibly involve errors that will complicate and eventually compromise the accuracy of a back-translation as an expected and targeted end- product.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers (both professional and the novice) have to commit themselves by undertaking more research regarding back-translation. Within the contemporary South African dispensation, back-translation distinguishes itself as surprisingly prevalent in many areas of technical, particularly legal and medical translation. The

researcher therefore hopes that further research on this phenomenon could possibly create possibilities for other complementary quality control mechanisms that could enhance the application of this particular and phenomenal method.

An ideal application of back-translation as quality control mechanism requires that there should be a robust interaction between the source text authors, the forward translator as well as the back translator. This is an area that is normally and rudely neglected in most translation practices. As a result, back translators are eventually blamed very unfairly without having had an opportunity to air their views.

One possibility that could afford a back-translator a chance to raise his voice, could be that he should be given an opportunity to write a translation report. In this way, the back-translator could show how he annotated the target text in terms of his previous translation experience. It would be better to have the second opinion about the first translation from an independent Sesotho expert. In doing so, back-translation as the final end-product could be refined and finally presented as error-free, linguistically accessible and culturally acceptable quality assurance mechanism.

LIMITATIONS OF
BACK-TRANSLATION

It lacks creativity. There is no significant usage of the translator's language experience (linguistic expertise). There is no stylistic beauty - back-translation does not cater for the expression of meaning or nuances of every word. Back-translation is only meant to establish whether the words in a back translated text match with those of the original text.

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