

The Virtues of Cultural Context and the Vices of *Translationese* in Sesotho Translation

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ABSTRACT The paper challenges the straight-jacket perception among some translation scholars that a source text-oriented translation (*translationese*) is a vice whereas a target text-oriented translation is a virtue. The researcher argues that a source text-oriented translation which may sometimes presents itself as *translationese*, is subjected to the principle of indeterminacy in the same way as indeterminacy is also embedded in the target text oriented translation. The method applied to test the argument empirically, is, in fact, to determine the role of cultural context in the translation process to determine whether the translation is a virtue or a vice. It is also imperative to determine whether the purpose of translation (*skopos*) and the equivalence principle between the source text and the target text have an effect on determining the translation as a virtue or a vice. The results reflect that cultural context is crucial and justifies the virtue of translation. Unfortunately, the equivalence principle is limited only to a special case scenario, whereas purpose-driven translation may be regulated by the translation brief. The paper finds that the principle of indeterminacy operates as a fundamental doubt in translation events, and suggests that it could have caused a paradigm shift from equivalence to the introduction of *skopos* paradigm, where purpose instead of mere equivalence is the underlying determining factor.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the cultural context of cardinal importance in the transference of message from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT). The study reflects that translations that are delivered out of cultural context are likely to result in *translationese*. Frawley (1984) is of the view that language of translation is distinct from ordinary language. Frawley (1984) contends further that the confrontation between the source language and the target language during the translation process result in *translationese*.

Translationese is defined by Newmark (1988) as the area of interference where a literal translation of a stretch of the source language text plainly falsify or ambiguates its meaning or even violates common usage. In other words, *translationese* is more source text-oriented and sometimes may appear as compromising the quality of translation. It is precisely this tendency that the researcher needs to investigate further as to whether *translationese* is only a vice and not a virtue in translation.

The study seeks to demonstrate that instances of *translationese* are vices in that they are only geared to express equivalence between the source text and the target text without necessar-

ily emphasising on the target cultural context. Even though sometimes the message could be delivered, it has a tendency to leave room for indeterminacy. Translations presented in cultural context are perceived to be of virtue and are more functional to express and to adequately relate to the purpose for which they are intended.

The topic is suggestive of the two translation paradigms, namely, equivalence paradigm where the dominant element in translation is merely equivalence between the source text and the target text, hence *translationese*. The translation approach in this case becomes source text-oriented. The topic also implies the *skopos* paradigm in this work in the sense that purpose is ideal to meaningfully express the intended message from the source text to the target. The translation approach, in this case, is target text-oriented and somehow accepted as more functional to the transference of the message.

Nord (1997) discovered that the translation purpose determines the choice of translation method and strategy (principle of functionality). The topic is coined as embedding the contrast in presentation between the *skopos* theoretical paradigm and the equivalence paradigm that seeks to establish the equivalence relationship between the source text and the target text.

The central point of the topic focuses on the involvement of cultural context, that is, whether translation is source text culturally oriented or target text culturally oriented. The researcher intends to argue that both the source text oriented translation as well as target text oriented translation may appear to be determinate depending on the purpose for which translation is intended. This is yet another dimension underlying the argumentation in this study. The researcher also moves from the premise that the nature of the source text that has to be translated also creates an illusion and provides a clue on the part of the translator with regard to the context within which it has to be translated. In other words, the researcher intends to refute the impression that translators normally uphold, namely, that only target oriented cultural context is determinate (virtue) whereas the source text based translation is indeterminate and is merely a *translationese* (a vice). The researcher views that the analysis of the topic should not be construed as a 'straight jacket' perception of the advantages and disadvantages of either the source text based or the target based translation on the basis of the cultural context. The researcher intends to show that either the source text or the target based translation does involve an element of indeterminacy or a fundamental doubt embedded within it.

Translation is suggestive of the cultural context applicable in the transference of the intended message from the source text to the target text. It is for this reason that Nida (2001) believes and explains how strict adherence to context creates a satisfactory translation. In most cases, translations are expected to be set for a different purpose in the target text unlike in the source text situation. However, as the source text is based in a different cultural context as opposed to the target text, it therefore follows that the translator has to pay serious attention to consider translating the target text within its relevant cultural context. This accounts for the first implied component of the topic – namely, to investigate the significance of cultural context in translation.

The second component of the topic deals with the situation where the translator merely establishes equivalence between the source text and the target text (*translationese*) as a vice. In this case, there is less emphasis on the cultural context, as a matter of necessity. This is a spe-

cial case scenario where there seems to be equivalence between the source text and the target text. The regulating principle therefore is the source text as a norm (source text oriented text) whereas in the second case scenario, the regulating principle is the achievement of the purpose of translation as proposed by the initiator or the translation commissioner (target text oriented translation).

Based on the analogy presented in the previous paragraph, the researcher postulates the following hypotheses:

In the first instance, the role of the cultural context in translation is suggestive of the *skopos* theoretical paradigm. The researcher maintains this view because the purpose of translation (within the parameters of this study) is expected to be achieved within the relevant cultural context of the targeted readers – hence the "virtues" of the cultural context are implied.

In the second instance, the study investigates the implied negative qualities underpinning translating outside the original cultural context. This implies an indeterminate language situation that identifies and manifests itself as *translationese* – hence vices of translation.

The researcher now suggests that the unifying hypothetical statement that binds the contrastive ideas in this study as captured in the given hypotheses is that:

"If translation is not based on its relevant cultural context, then, it is likely that it would culminate in translationese". However, it does not necessarily mean that only a target text oriented translation is functional to the target readers.

It may appear that both the source text and the target text may be indeterminate. However, in the third instance, the researcher is of the opinion that the possibility that both the source and the target oriented translations enshrine the element of indeterminacy should not be discarded by the budding and the professional translators.

Another facet of prime focus in this study is to present a comparative analysis of the dynamics of a *skopos* paradigm or purpose-based epistemological break against the equivalence principle. Generally speaking, the paper intends to reflect on the general fundamental characteristics of translation as opposed to specific translation scenario or *translationese* as suggested in the topic.

Aim of the Study

The aim in this study is to verify whether contextualising translation within the target cultural situation is more functional (virtues) or whether translating in the source text oriented language would be more effective and functional in translation in general, and Sesotho translation in particular. The aim is to establish whether the establishment of equivalence in translation (which may be implied by *translationese*) is more significant in translation than translating in terms of the purpose (implied by the cultural context).

It therefore speaks on its own that this work intends also to account for the shifts of paradigms (from equivalence paradigm, that is determined in this case by *translationese* as a source oriented language to *skopos* or purpose-based paradigm that is expressed by target oriented language and target culture based). House (2004) confirms that equivalence principle enshrines prescriptive effect in her view that:

“The basic requirement for equivalence of the source text and the target text ... is that a target text, in order to be equivalent to its source text, should have a feature ... which is equivalent to source text’s function.”

However, it is not the aim of the researcher to apply a prescriptive approach in this study. More of the operational approach in this paper will be explicated at the level of the method or *modus operandi* to be applied.

Vermeer (2004) argues that there may be a number of *skopoi* for the same text, requiring different strategies and approaches in order to achieve each *skopos*. As already indicated, it will be ideal to determine the purpose of translation as well as the cultural context within which the purpose should be established.

Frawley (1984) defines *translationese* as a compromise between the norms or patterns of source language and target language, the researcher explains this view in relation to the cultural context in translation.

The aim of this venture is to establish the nature of language that is perceived as virtue to the Basotho as opposed to the one that could be regarded as vices among the Basotho reading public.

Literature Review

Most of the translation scholars prior 1984 were inclined to focus mainly on the establish-

ment of equivalence between the original source text and the target text. The trend in doing so was that the target text would be translated within the source text cultural framework (source text-oriented). Pym (2010) is of the opinion that in the 1980s, translation theory experienced a paradigm shift. Prior 1984, the prevailing approach to translation was that of equivalence. Translations then appeared to be stilted and fell short to adequately express the intended message within the original target text culture and in terms of an accessible target language. It is against this background that the German scholars, such as Nord (2002), Vermeer (2004) and Holz-Mänttärri (1984) introduced a shift in paradigm and suggested the purpose of translation as an alternative point of major focus. Munday (2001) is one of the scholars who soon realised that the equivalence approach is too limiting and that it involves the problem of testing equivalent reactions empirically.

Seeing that translations prior 1984 were mainly based on the source text as the norm or the criterion through which a good translation is determined, it therefore implied that the introduction of purpose as translation paradigm resulted into dethroning the source text as norm. Linked to the introduction of purpose, the German scholars came up with a discovery that translation does not occur in a void but within its cultural context. In other words, it is not the relationship between the source text and the target text that determines quality in translation, but, of importance, its cultural content. Sapir (1956:690) opines and concurs to the view that:

“No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”

The idea here is to discuss the significance of culture as the underlying factor in Sesotho translation. Virtue in this case implies the significance of cultural context in Sesotho translation. This implies that any Sesotho translation that is not contextualised on its relevant culture tends to be less communicable to the target readers. The language tends to be unusual to the common everyday Basotho language.

The reasons for this change of language are that Sesotho translation emulates the language structures of the English source language. This serves as vices on the part of the Basotho as it

stifles the Sesotho language and makes it to appear as inaccessible and strange to Basotho as the custodians of Sesotho language.

In essence, virtues of cultural context and vices of *translationese* refer to communicative as opposed to semantic translation in the case of Newmark (1988); *indigenisation* as opposed to *foreignisation* in the case of Venuti (1995); instrumental and documentary translation in the case of Nord (2002).

Semantic translation establishes equivalence by supplying equivalent semantic content for words found in the source text. In contrast, communicative translation is more or less equivalent to a cultural adaptation of the source text so that the target readership finds it easier to read. This is implicitly the most communicable translation type.

The present work suggests a disjuncture between the source and the target text. In other words, there should be no language that seems to be used as the norm against which the other language should operate. The two languages constitute a particular language combination and are derived from the two distinct worlds. Embedded within each language is the whole issue of indeterminacy which the researcher claims to be influencing the quality of translation in relation to the expectations of the reader.

Different texts warrant different approaches depending on the purpose for which they are translated. However, many translation scholars are of the opinion that *translationese* is less effective or functional to express the author's intended message. Some authors on the other hand are of the opinion that fundamentally, translation should be made within the context of its own original culture. This forms the basis of the argument in this study.

Translation, scholars maintain, cannot occur in a void but in a particular cultural context. It is this philosophical controversy in translation that motivated the researcher to try to investigate factors that cause the cultural contextualisation of translation and when *translationese* (or source text oriented language) is applied and for what reasons. In other words, in doing so, this study would have succeeded to explain the virtues of cultural context and perhaps identified the vices of *translationese*, if there are any. Bassnett et al. (1998: 23) maintain that:

"There has never been a better time to study translations. From being a marginal activity

outside of linguistics, at the edges of literary studies ... translation is now being reconsidered, and its fundamental importance in intercultural transfer processes is becoming more apparent."

The cultural context as a framework within which translation is produced serves as the basis of an apparent controversy among the translation scholars. It regards the context within which translation should be made. Scholars are also not in agreement regarding the nature of language that is thought to be relevant and functional to express the equivalence with the source text and also manage to express the intended message.

METHODS

The present research work is undertaken to reflect on the proposition that both the source and target texts are representative of their specific cultural worlds. They represent the world of the source text author and the world of the target text reader, respectively. In the light of this perception, the approach implemented in this study is largely descriptive and not prescriptive.

As part of the method applied in this study, the researcher considers translation of texts from the various fields (such as technical, medical, and legal) in order to establish whether the target language used in each scenario is typically source text-oriented or whether it is target text based. The researcher also considers the effect of the language used as either of virtue or vice. The research also intends to verify whether the language used in translation (*translationese*) may be characterised as typically virtuous or else less significant (vice) to the cultural world of the intended language group. However, the researcher is mindful of the fact that translations are always inclined to involve certain degrees of indeterminacy which may influence the nature of translation as either of virtue or a vice. This whole issue will also be factored in the presentations of this study.

Tentative statements (hypotheses) that the researcher postulated in order to try to verify in this study are the following:

Firstly, source text-oriented language renders translation to be functional to the transference of the message from the source text author.

Secondly, target text oriented language is more responsive to the cultural context as background to the world of the target text receivers.

Thirdly, the translator's application of cultural context as background to translation process declares the Sesotho translation as virtuous or a vice.

Sesotho translations tend to involve the indeterminacy principle that normally makes translators to produce more translations options than they intended to. Chesterman (1997) has made a discovery in respect of equivalence principle that source texts have to be translated as literally as possible, for example, "word-for-word".

In this particular case, there is a likelihood that translation may result in being a *translationese* and may not necessarily be in line with the cultural features of the target situation. The researcher explicates the various factors that influence the translation as the end-result of virtue or a vice in this particular study.

Within the parameters of this study and in line with the factors that the researcher intends to investigate, the work will only be confined to the given texts treated as part of operationalization in the next paragraph. The basic idea is necessarily to make an empirical test of the validity of the propositions stated as hypotheses above. In a stricter sense, the idea is to judge whether the translations manage to determine the equivalence and also access the purpose of the author as postulated or implied in the translation brief.

Operationalisation

As already indicated about the method that would be applied in this study, the texts that would be analysed in this study are derived from the legal, medical, religious, literary and language fields. In doing so, readers of this work can then make their own judgement as to whether there is a connection between the nature of the text as well as the language used in translation. As a matter of necessity, observations will then be drawn after each analysis of each text from a specific field.

The researcher decided to select on source text from each field, such as legal field, the medical field, religion, literature including idiomatic expressions in the everyday English language usage. The researcher intends to show case the relevance of translating within the target cultur-

al context and to translate with a view to establish the equivalence (where possible) between the source and the target text. It is for this purpose that Bassnett et al. (1990:3) maintain strongly that:

"Translation is primarily contextual. It is a fact of history and a product of the target culture, and as such, it cannot be explained through the mapping of linguistic correspondence between languages ..."

The following are the texts derived from the various fields and will be discussed in relation to their nature (text types) and also with a view to express their possibility of being a virtue or vice to the transference of meaning.

Example 1

English Idiomatic Expression

ST: I heard it through the grapevine

TT1: *Ke utlwile ka bofuufu*

TT2: *Ke utlwile ka mabarebare*

TT3: *Ke utlwile menyenetsi*

The three translation options are produced within the context of the Basotho culture. Context is therefore of paramount importance in the articulation of the three targeted translations.

Example 2

ST: We have a good story to tell

TT1: *Re na le pale e monate eo re ka o phetelang yona*

TT2: *Re na le ditaba tsa bohlokwa tseo re ka le bolellang tsona*

TT3: *Re na le taba e molemo eo re ka o phetelang yona*

The first translation option (TT1) appears to go word-for-word. It is not necessarily presented to honour the cultural and linguistic interests of the target readers. A complete analysis of these translation options will be made as part of discussion of results.

Example 3

ST: It is in your hands to build your future

TT1: *Ke boikgethelo ba hao ho aha bokamoso ba hao*

TT2: *Ke thato ya hao ho iketsetsa bokamoso*

The translator avoided to go word-for-word but still managed to produce meaningful translations.

Example 4*Text Derived From Religious Field*

ST: “My heart exults in the Lord:
my strength is exalted in the Lord.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in thy salvation.”

TT: “*Pelo ya ka e thabela Morena:
matla a ka a thabela ho sebeletsa
Morena.
molomo wa ka o nyedisa dira tsa ka,
hobane ke thabela poloko ya Hae.*”

It becomes obvious that based on the context, the translator had no problem to transfer the source text into the target text situation.

Example 5*Medical Text*

ST: *Bio-Strath* tablets are made exclusively from natural raw materials and are free from artificial colourants, preservatives and synthetic substances.

TT: *Dipidisi tsa Bio-Strath di entswe ka ho qolleha ka thepa ya tlhaho mme ha di na metswako ya mmala, disebediswa tsa thibelo esita le metswako e itseng.*

RESULTS

As part of the results, the researcher collated all the translation examples and reflects on them as follows:

Example 1*English idiomatic expression*

In this particular case, context is significantly used to transfer the text from the source to the target language situation. In doing so, the researcher is reminded of Eskola (2004: 10) who maintains the view that:

“Translations tend to under-represent target – language-specific, unique linguistic features and over-represent features that have straight-forward translation equivalents which are frequently used in the source language”

The readers of this study will be mindful of the fact that the translator has to search in Sesotho situation as to whether there is an avail-

able equivalent Sesotho idiomatic expression, but it could not be found. As a matter of necessity, the translator had to devise all the means to produce translation(s) that would satisfy the cultural needs of the Basotho readers. As indicated before that indeterminacy seems to be an embedded or built-in aspect in most translations, the translator had no alternative but to try to come up with the three possible translations.

The three translation options are based on the Basotho experience of culture. Each option signifies the language usage that the traditional Basotho used to employ in order to hide the name of the informer. The cultural tendency, within which the three options are set, is that the name of the informer is not always disclosed amongst the Basotho traditional group. The name of the informer among the Basotho should remain anonymous and other people should not know or even have suspicions about him altogether.

However, readers may like to know the reason there are three translation options instead of only one. It goes back to the availability or the embeddedness of indeterminacy in translation. Apparently there is a built-in doubt that a specific translation may be the only one that is relevant – hence the three possible translation options.

As Toury (1995) criticises source-oriented theories that they do not suit translation realities because they are abstract, prescriptive norms that do not stem from actual translation process, it then becomes clear that context is significant to render good translation. It serves as another mechanism that fights against indeterminacy in Sesotho translation

Example 2*An English persuasive source text*

In this case, the translator had to express the same degree of emphasis in the target text (as in the source text) with a view generate more interest on the part of the Sesotho readers. It could have been that the translator experienced a fundamental doubt as to whether the Sesotho translation is effective enough to convince the readers, hence the production of the three possible translations instead of only one. The element of indeterminacy is again accountable and had been effective in this case.

Example 3*Context in translation process*

It tends to be clear in this example that in the case where the translator already know the background against which translation has to be made, the translation process becomes easier and more meaningful. Here the context underlying the translation process becomes quite significant and functional to express the intended message effectively and efficiently.

Example 4*Text derived from religious field*

It should be clear that in this particular translation situation, is that the translator tries by all means to express the message in the manner that will be as close to the source text as possible. However, the translator does not apply the features of source language culture that may tend to neglect the peculiar properties of Sesotho language. In other words, the message is expressed within the Sesotho language that would be more accessible and acceptable to the Basotho cultural context. The Bible is culturally contextualised and within the framework of the contemporary social life of the Basotho as custodians of the language.

Example 5*Medical text*

In this particular text a literal translation tends to be imperative in the sense that translation has to be as explicit as possible to clearly correspond with the scientific terms applied in the source text. However, the tendency and the possibility could be that the translation may be more source text oriented or a bit indeterminate. This is partly due to interference of the source language structures on the target structures. It is for this reason that Gellerstam (1986) emphasised the effects of interference, the process by which a specific source language leaves distinct marks or finger prints in the target language.

DISCUSSION

In example one, the three translation options are all embedded within the Basotho cultural

context. The translations signify the original Basotho response to an English idiomatic expression. Given the above translation options, it becomes almost crystal clear that the translator has utilised the cultural epistemological background of the Basotho in order to render meaningful translation options of the source text.

The three translations do not need any explicitation or simplification to have their meanings stabilised and grammatical and accessible to the target reader. It shows that they are being presented as balanced because of their cultural embeddedness. Otherwise, if they could have been merely presented in order to establish equivalence, perhaps the meaning and the quality of translation could have been compromised.

In example two, the three options are taken from the utterance of one political campaign of a particular political party. It is therefore intended to influence the followers to realise the pedigree and the reputation of the concerned political party. The assertion is therefore persuasive in character in terms of the purpose for which it is articulated.

It is therefore obvious that there would probably be more than one translation option in that the translator endeavours to establish the most powerful statement that can capture the imagination of the listeners and successfully access the purpose of translation.

In example three, the context in the given translation as stated above, is that the speaker gives the hearer the latitude to make his/her own choice within his right about his future. It seems that the translator understood the underlying message of the source text and only transferred it to the target situation. The message appears as relevant to the Sesotho target situation. It also appears that the equivalence is maintained. However, this is an example of a special case scenario but that does not necessarily imply a vice or a shortcoming, whatsoever.

In example four, the background underlying this text is that readers are spiritually motivated to put their trust in the Lord. In this way, motivation is the key-word in this particular case.

In example five, this is a persuasive text that presents a particular product that has been advertised. Primarily, the text involves language that is more common in the world of business. To a very large extent the translator tries to maintain equivalence with the source text in order to explicitly express the finer details entailed in the

advert. Toury (1980) concurs that equivalence was a feature of all translations no matter their linguistic or aesthetic quality.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that both the establishment of equivalence and the achievement of purpose between the source and the target texts are significant to yield a meaningful translation. The study presents a different perspective against the impressions created in the topic. Readers will remember that the topic seems to suggest that context is more important in the translation process than the determination of an equivalent target text. Yet equivalence is fundamental and accounts for the basic idea regarding translation.

As context can be important to stabilise the meaning in the translation, the equivalence principle can as well be important in the translation of both the legal as well as medical texts. In this way, the translator may manage to retain equivalence between the source text and the target text with a view to communicate the same message in the translated text as implied in the source text.

However, the study also reflected that translations that are out of their relevant cultural context become more indeterminate and pose more challenges on the part of the reader to access the message that is communicated. This implies that source text oriented translations are more challenging to target readers seeing that they are not culturally contextualised. In their case, a feature of source language culture becomes an obtrusive factor in a persuasive text and has to be translated for a different type of readership. The vices of *translationese* are the interference from source language spilling over into translation in a particular way.

Otherwise, the source text oriented translations are normally meant to determine the equal value between the source and the target text. However, the message sometimes becomes stifled, stilted, sacrificed and almost compromised in *translationese*, but in essence the equivalence principle is still maintained, even though.

The researcher has to make it crystal clear that any translation is based on the understanding that it presupposes equivalence between the source text and the target text. It should therefore not be construed that equivalence principle is a vice or mediocrity in translation.

Fundamentally, translation implies the relationship between the source text and the target text in terms of having equal value. It only depends on the expertise of the translator in his articulation of language to present the translation as a product of virtue or a vice in terms of the transference of the message. In other words, it is not the case that all translations that signify equivalence will manifest characteristics of *translationese*.

One basic observation underlying this study is that it adds more meaning towards a shift of paradigm from equivalence to *skopos* epistemological paradigm. Based on the understanding that the principle of indeterminacy always exist between the source and the target text, it tends to be clearer that each paradigm cannot necessarily be perpetual. However, one paradigm is only a virtue or a vice in so far as it satisfies the expectations of the translator, the initiator as well as the target group.

The study discovered that any translation paradigm is tantamount to involve an e basic element of indeterminacy depending on its cultural transference, its language articulation as well as its capacity to satisfy the reading requirements of the targeted readers. Finally, it appears that there are various mechanisms that should be considered to judge both the source and the target based translations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends to professional as well as budding translators that cultural context should be taken into consideration during the translation process. Translations that are out of context compromise the target language and downgrade the quality of transference of the message itself. However, the study also demonstrates that technical texts are amenable to source text oriented language. It is therefore important to notice that the application of a source text oriented language should not just be construed as a vice but also a virtue.

In the case where technical and scientific terminology has been used, and in the case where there are no equivalent Sesotho terms, the source text oriented language tends to be more meaningful to be applied. However, sentences should be constructed in such a manner that the meaning remains original and accessible to the reader. In this case, the cultural context should

also be taken into consideration as crucial to stabilise the meaning.

The study recommends also that a variety of aspects should be considered before translation process can take place. It is ideal for the source text to be thoroughly analysed with a view to establish its purpose, translation strategies, the nature of text(s) translated as well as the target group for whom the translation is directed.

It is not a matter of an automatic straight-jacket decision to be taken that target text-oriented translation is more purposeful and functional to readers than a source text-oriented translation. It depends on the dynamics of language usage, the context and the time and place for critics to make final decisions

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