



University of Tikrit

College of Education for Women

English Department

Undergraduate Studies

Fourth Year Student

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Assist. Prof Dr. Amer Hamed Suliman

amer.albano@ tu.edu.iq

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What is Translation?

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Translation is the process of transferring meaning from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL) as accurately and completely as possible. The essence of translation is not just about converting words from one language to another; it involves a careful consideration of various linguistic and cultural factors to ensure that the meaning is preserved across languages. There are different approaches to achieving this goal, depending on the nature of the text and the intended audience.

In practice, translation involves several methods, including:

1. **Direct Equivalence:** Translating words or phrases that have a direct equivalent in the target language. For example, the English word "speak" translates directly to "يتحدث" in Arabic.
2. **New Term Creation:** When no direct equivalent exists in the target language, new terms must be created. An example is the word "satellite," which might not have a pre-existing equivalent in Arabic and may require the creation of a new term.
3. **Transliteration:** This involves writing foreign words in the script of the target language while preserving their original pronunciation. For instance, "aspirin" becomes "أسبرين" in Arabic.
4. **Adaptation:** Some terms need to be adapted to fit the pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical rules of the target language, such as "democracy," which is adapted into "ديمقراطية" in Arabic.

These approaches highlight the complexity of translation, where the translator must not only consider the direct meaning of words but also the cultural and contextual nuances that come with them.

What Do We Translate?

When we translate, we are not simply converting grammar, words, style, or sounds individually. Instead, we focus on translating meaning. Meaning is a multifaceted concept that emerges from the interaction of various components of language, including:

Grammar: The rules that govern sentence structure, such as tenses, clauses, and modals.

Vocabulary: The words themselves, including their connotations, synonymy, polysemy, and collocations.

Style: The manner of expression, which includes formality, ambiguity, fronting, and parallelism.

Phonology: The sound aspects of language, such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and assonance.

Each of these components contributes to the overall meaning of a text. In translation, the goal is to convey this meaning from the source language to the target language, while accounting for how these elements interact to produce a coherent and accurate representation of the original text. It's important to note that meaning is not solely the product of individual words, but a complex network of language components that work together within a specific context to convey an intended message.

How Do We Translate?

This question brings us to two main considerations: (1) Methods of Translation and (2) The Process of Translation.

Methods of Translation

A method of translation refers to the approach taken in translating a text, whether it be literal or free, focused on words or meaning, form or content, or any other dichotomy. Various scholars have proposed different methods based on these fundamental distinctions:

1. **Literal vs. Free Translation** (Newmark, 1981 & 1988)
2. **Semantic vs. Communicative Translation** (Newmark)
3. **Formal Correspondence vs. Textual Equivalence** (Catford, 1963)
4. **Formal Equivalence vs. Dynamic Translation** (Nida, 1964; Nida & Taber, 1969)
5. **Non-pragmatic vs. Pragmatic Translation** (Bell, 1991; Hatim & Mason, 1990 & 1997; Baker, 1998; Snell-Hornby, 1988)
6. **Non-creative vs. Creative Translation** (Beylard-Ozeroff, 1998)
7. **Non-idiomatic vs. Idiomatic Translation** (Newmark, 1988)

At the heart of these discussions is the age-old debate between literal and free translation methods. As Newmark (1988) points out, "The central problem of translating has always been whether to translate literally or freely." By examining these two approaches, we can gain a better understanding of the ongoing debate about translation methods.

Literal Translation: This method involves translating the text as closely to the original as possible, maintaining the exact wording and structure of the source language. There are different forms of literal translation, including:

Word-for-Word Translation: Each word in the source language is directly translated into the target language, maintaining the original word order and structure. While this method can be useful for certain technical or highly specific texts, it often fails to convey the intended meaning in more nuanced contexts.

One-to-One Translation: This approach involves translating each word or phrase into an equivalent word or phrase in the target language, while respecting collocational meanings and contextual usage. It is more flexible than word-for-word translation and considers the context in which words are used.

Literal Translation of Meaning: Also known as direct translation, this method focuses on conveying the meaning as closely and accurately as possible within the context of the target language. It accounts for the nuances of grammar, word order, and idiomatic expressions, making it a more refined and effective approach to literal translation.

Free Translation: In contrast to literal translation, free translation prioritizes the overall meaning and intent of the source text, often at the expense of exact wording and structure. This method is commonly used in literary or creative texts where capturing the tone, style, and emotional impact is more important than adhering strictly to the original wording. Free translation can be further categorized into:

Bound Free Translation: This method derives meaning directly from the context, allowing for some flexibility and expressivity while still remaining closely tied to the original text.

Loose Free Translation: This approach takes more liberties with the text, translating not only the literal meaning but also the implied intentions and nuances, often leading to a more interpretative translation.

The Process of Translation

The process of translation involves a series of organized stages that guide the translator from the source text to the final translated version. These stages include:

Understanding the Text: The translator must first thoroughly understand the source text, including its context, purpose, and intended audience.

Identifying Units of Translation: Rather than translating word by word, translators typically work with "units of translation," which can be words, phrases, clauses, sentences, or even paragraphs that convey a specific meaning.

Translating the Units: The translator then proceeds to translate each unit, ensuring that the meaning is preserved and that the translation reads naturally in the target language.

Revising and Editing: After the initial translation, the text is reviewed and revised to ensure accuracy, coherence, and cultural appropriateness.

Finalizing the Translation: The final step involves polishing the translation, making any necessary adjustments to ensure that it meets the standards of the target language and effectively conveys the original meaning.

The translation process is a complex and multifaceted task that requires careful consideration of linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors. Whether using a literal or free translation method, the ultimate goal is to produce a translation that is accurate, meaningful, and appropriate for the target audience.