

TMA 08 option (b)

In 'Translation and advertising: going global' Candace Séguinot argues that 'the marketing of goods and services across cultural boundaries involves an understanding of culture and semiotics that goes well beyond both language and design'. What are the main points she makes in support of this claim? Evaluate her arguments in the light of your study elsewhere in the course.

Introduction

In this essay I will outline the main arguments brought forward by Candace Séguinot from the School of Translation of Glendon College, York University, Ontario, Canada in her article *Translation and advertising: going global*. While doing so, I will comment and expand on some of them, drawing on both the course material and my own experience, especially in the field of software engineering.

The article and its main arguments

In her article Candace Séguinot discusses the changes which have occurred in the role of the translator due to the globalisation of marketing, where advertising is meant to target not only the internal consumer within a specific country, but also the more general international community of buyers.

- Being able to translate successfully an advertisement, public relations material or a press release requires certain skills which go beyond the simple knowledge of terminology correlation, that is, understanding what a term means and finding the correspondent word in the target language. Séguinot describe this as the difference between *translation* and *adaptation*.

In my opinion, pure translation is nowadays seldom appropriate; perhaps only simple texts, such as instructions on how to assemble toys or furniture can be translated literally while retaining most of the original meaning (also due to the fact that diagrams and pictures usually accompany such instructions and make the text nearly redundant). Any other type of text needs more refined procedures to preserve the intended message.

- A major shift in expectations has taken place with the advance of technology and the translators are more often than not required to provide the translation of text and other elements as well as to look after the layout and visual aspect of the original advertisement, in many cases taking on the role of a graphic artist. Such expectations also include issues such as legal and marketing know-how, as the author expresses in the following quote:

Translators do not have the expertise or legal responsibility to check on legislation, guard against copyright infringements, carry out market research, etc. in their home territory, let alone in foreign countries.

Séguinot reinforces the argument by stating that

Translators are implicitly expected to understand the requirements of different markets, and this means that translators need to understand the cultures towards which they are translating.

Although her reasoning has merit, in the above two paragraphs she seems to imply that the majority of translators are translating from their mother tongue into a foreign language. In my experience, this is not the case. In fact, many companies or institutions have a strict policy of only employing native speakers of the

target language who must have a good understanding of the source (and for them foreign) culture. Perhaps Séguinot's position reflects North American practices on this issue?

- Another point made by the author, is the differentiation between ads and marketing/public relations material. Both types of texts relate to different genres. Advertisement might make more use of visual and multimodal elements, while public relations announcements or press releases rely strongly on the textual content to bring across their message. In some cases, parts of the information of both type are subject to regulations which can vary from country to country and might pose a problem for the translator (such as food labels).
- The context also determines how the text is perceived. It is a factor that must be taken into consideration when translating into another language; indeed, there is often a strong relationship between promotional material and the text which surrounds it. Advertising agencies often know how to create a synergy between two separate marketing messages, however, the translator is not always in the capacity of influencing how the space on a page, billboard or TV slot is allocated.
- Because the translator's main task is to translate words, a good understanding of typography is required in order to avoid possible problems. Séguinot mentions wrong hyphenation and loss of accented characters as a result from "improper" handling of the text by people who are not familiar with the target language. To this, I would add the issues related to encoding and character set common in computing. Trying to represent Chinese or Japanese characters (termed *double byte*) on a computer monitor is more complicated than it is to write or print the same symbols on a piece of paper. By just forgetting to turn on a single option, a whole text (including graphics) can end up being displayed as gibberish, since the computer does not know how to make sense of what is encoded as Russian, Greek, or Thai characters.
- Linked to the advancement of modern technology is the issue of *iconicity* and the use of pictures and illustrations¹ in promotional material. The task of the translator is to retain consistency making sure that the semantic relationship between text and images reflects as closely as possible the original.

Iconicity plays a prominent role in the design of modern software. While in the early days most commands were represented by words (*open, save, copy, quit*, etc.) it has become increasingly common to use pictures placed on toolbars to achieve the desired functionality. It would appear that the reasoning behind this is that space can be saved, since using a tiny representation of a filing cabinet instead of the words *save file as* allows placing more commands in a given area of the computer screen. However, it has also become something of a marketing tool with the aim of letting the software appearing more user-friendly.

The interesting aspect of icons used in software toolbars is that they can combine verbal and visual elements and either represent verbs or names. Sharon Goodman, for example, writes:

*Looking at the row of symbols (the second row) along the top of the screen, can you say with any certainty that these are strictly visual or verbal? Some, such as the second one which is meant to represent 'open a file' could be seen as corresponding to the verb **open**. The next one (the picture of a computer disk) represents the command **save**, but is more accurately described as a visual representation of a noun, **disk**. (Goodman, 1996a, pp. 40-1)*

In terms of the difficulties created by the use of iconic elements it is also worth mentioning the issue of textual icons, that is, buttons which not only contain

1. The use of illustrations can be of three types: *iconic*, when the picture depicts the object with its real shape and other visual characteristics; *symbolic*, when the qualities of the object are foreground rather than its appearance; *indexical*, when the illustration does not directly represent the object itself, but focuses, instead, on the attributes of the owner "through a process of logical deduction" (Séguinot, 1996).

iconic symbols, but also make reference to the word they represent. For example, in many toolbars, buttons with **P**, **B**, *I* and U are assigned to manipulation of text style. They illustrate the action performed by their associated command both by displaying the actual text style but also by using the first letter of the style name (in English): *plain*, *bold*, *italic* and *underlined*. It is easy to see how the consistency can be broken when translating into a language, such as German, where *bold* is expressed by the word *fett*. In this case, the translator has to edit the icons and change their appearance according to the target language. Considering the high cost of software translation, this is not a good approach. In general, it is preferable to maintain text-independence in toolbar icons, so that translation is not necessary (in our case, the buttons could have used the more general **A**, **A**, *A* and A).

- Being aware of culture-specific issues is one of the most problematic aspects of translation for a globalised market. Séguinot illustrates this by mentioning the ‘incident’ of the reversed kimono fold in an airline’s in-flight magazine. Again, it is possible to find similar issues in the area of software design. When recently an icon artist was asked to produce a button to symbolise wisdom, he came up with the outline of an owl. While he took for granted that this was a universal concept, he did not realise that in Central America the night bird represents witchcraft and black magic and such an icon would have been quite inappropriate.

Following from this example, there is a wider consideration to make. While many mis-interpretations (such as the kimono mentioned above) taking place from any language into any language can create misunderstandings, embarrassment or revenue loss, a more detrimental effect exists, in my opinion, when considering incorrect cultural assumptions made by the English-speaker, and in particular by certain sectors of society which exercise a strong influence on the world economy (the media and software industries spring to mind). Given the penetration and high status of these sectors, it is plausible to think that, as time goes by, many English-centric concepts and values will become more acceptable to otherwise very different cultures. Global communication through satellite and more international curricula are already contributing to this process. Moreover, a well-defined social class employs English as a tool for maintaining their privileges. D.P. Pattanayak states that

English is backed by international groups which treat English as an instrument of colonisation and as a commodity for trade. Intranationally it is the support system for the managerial mini-sector for the preservation of privileges. It promotes the generation, sustenance, and socialisation of a conspicuously consumeristic life style. It interprets skill migration as brightening life chances, and it accentuates the divide between (1) rural and urban, (2) the developing and the developed, and (3) elites and masses. (Quoted in Graddol, 1996, p. 200)

- One of Séguinot’s preoccupations relates to the lack of access to the product or object by part of the translator (perhaps because the contract arrives through an advertising agency). In such situations, it is often impossible to understand exactly out to interpret the original text and place it in the relevant context. Metaphors and sophisticated linguistic devices are particularly difficult to “convert” to another language.

To go back once more to the software industry, this is probably one of the most significant issues when it comes to the translation of computer programs. Deadline and budget-driven localisation projects often result in all words (*strings*, in computer parlance) of a piece of software being extracted with some tool and saved in a single text document. The translator has then the task of making sense of phrases which are out of context. I have seen the frustration of experienced linguists trying to handle sentences such as *You cannot save the ^0 because of an error*, where the ^0 symbol represents some piece of information coming from somewhere else in the program (assuming French as the target language it is easy to see how differences in morphology from English can result in really tricky situations: regardless of what the separate list of names might include, *file*, *template*, *draft*, etc., the defi-

nite article will always be right in English. In French, however, a dependency on the following word will alter the article, making it impossible to produce correct sentences for all the permutations unless a software design action is taken¹).

- Different cultures give different values more or less importance. When looking at an advertisement, for example, the identification with its subjects can vary considerably (in other words, the indexical values differ). What motivates an Irish individual to drink a particular brand of beer, for example, does not necessarily work on someone from another cultural background.

I have always been negatively impressed by an ad created for a Guinness beer which depicted (allegedly in a humorous way) a raving man throwing out of the window the entire content of his home to make enough space for a 'big pint'. What disturbed me most was the image of the children's toys being smashed in the front garden by a father who, obviously, gave more importance to drinking than to his own offspring. I wonder how many Irish people have perceived the same, but this illustrates well, the issues at stake.

- Candace Séguinot stresses the diversity of language choice between advertisements for a competitive market and those for the introduction of a new product. The consequences of this can be significant in the contest of a globalised market. In her words

If the original choice of language was designed for a market in which there are competitors and the target text is designed for virgin territory, the campaign will likely fail.

- Similarly, the positioning of new products globally is easier than the repositioning of existing ones because what has already been presented in a certain way in one country could be perceived differently (and possibly negatively) if the message were not adjusted and adapted to that country's *Weltanschauung*. It has been possible to identify two types of contrasts related to the perception of advertising: the East-West difference and the variation in preferences. The former takes as critical factor the diverse decision-behaviour values which distinguish eastern societies from the western community; the latter refers to the propensity for style and visual elements rather than for text and argumentation.
- If the ads are not carefully designed for a global market, mix-ups are likely to happen. The most problematic areas are word play, allusions, and words that do not translate well or at all into other languages. There are innumerable examples of catch phrases, slogans, brand names and product definitions that have failed to communicate the intended message due to cultural differences.
- Translators must adopt the discourse language used by the ad designer in order to convey as closely as possible the original message. Thus, proficiency in sales and marketing jargon are mandatory. The techniques of informalization, and marketization², for example, are increasingly employed throughout the advertising industry, by private companies and public institutions, to make a product or a service more desirable.
- One of the most delicate issue relates to legislation. Sometimes translators must choose their words very carefully to adhere to directives and country-specific laws.

I see a challenge here especially with respect to new information channels which have emerged in recent years: cable TV and the Internet open up a whole new area to be tackled by the legislators on an international level. The dominance of English in both mediums can have a negative impact on the global landscape of languages.

1. For example, by re-writing the string to *you cannot save ^0 because of an error* and having the external list contain each individual name preceded by the appropriate article.
 2. *Informalization* and *marketization* denote the socio-linguistic processes by which public and professional discourse are adopting more informal characteristics to render them accessible and marketable. (see Goodman, 1996b, pp. 141-159)

Conclusion

The role of the translator has certainly changed in recent times due to the globalisation of a market which aims at targeting virtually any individual on the planet. Culture-specific factors must be taken into consideration when adapting texts and the visual elements which go with them, in order to make them become accepted in the target market. The biggest challenge is to try removing heteroglossic references to foreign customs when these can distort the perception of the advertisement, or promotional material.

To better visualise the interplay of language and society it is useful to refer to Michael Halliday's framework of communicative metafunctions. His *ideational* metafunction states that every semiotic mode will have resources for constructing representations of the world. Clearly this aspect is bound to differ from culture to culture and it is the first obstacle to transparent and effective translation. However, it is, in my opinion, the *interpersonal* metafunction which poses the main threat to global understanding in a 'badly translated' world:

Every semiotic mode will have resources for constructing (a) relations between the communicating parties; and (b) relations between these communicating parties and what they are representing, in other words, attitudes to the subject they are communicating about. (Quoted in Goodman, 1996a, p. 53)

References

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