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Non-cognitive causes of imprecision in consecutive interpreting in diplomatic settings in light of functionalism

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Abstract

The translation literature is replete with discussions on the need of precision in interpretation. However, the functional theories, for instance, emphasize the role of function rather than precision, as being of primary importance. This study is aimed to highlight this priority in diplomatic settings where imprecise renderings may be needed by consecutive interpreter for subject-specific reasons. These causes are, mainly, non-cognitive, and classified into 3 groups in the paper, namely, commissioner-, commission- and commissionee-originated causes. It is suggested that in the consecutive interpreting of “sensitive” diplomatic texts, precision is not necessarily a norm. Though the research was made with Turkish-English language pair, the general conclusion of the unsuitability of maintaining blind faith in precision can readily be applied to any other language pair in the process of interpreting, in such sensitive settings.

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1. Introduction

In the translation literature, precision has generally been considered to relate to a standardized terminology, which is regarded as the most powerful tool available for specialists to express themselves, to exchange views and to organize the structure of their respective disciplines within a specific scientific domain (Cabr e et al., 1999, p. 45). Focusing on the use of terminology, “limiting the use of synonymous expressions” (Strehlow, 1988), analyzes, have highlighted

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lexical units and cross-linguistic constraints from a cognitive perspective, which can be explained as relating to or involving conscious mental activities such as thinking, understanding, learning and remembering (Merriam-Webster, 2016). Non-cognitive issues received far less attention in translation studies, apart from a few exceptions (Baker, 1997). In fact, non-cognitive issues play a role, not less, if not more, important than the cognitive ones.

This paper is intended to analyze the possible non-cognitive causes for imprecision in consecutive interpreting of sensitive texts in diplomatic setting. In such settings, each and every word is carefully weighed and reacted to accordingly by all the parties involved. The “sensitivity” of a setting arises from the following features, as specified by Schäffner (1997) within the framework of political texts: i. a change intentionally made in a text which would change its function, e.g. transforming a persuasive text into an informative one. ii. The use of texts in negotiations, in which the role of the text is different from its intended purpose in the production stage. iii. different interpretations of the same lexical unit for specific political or ideological purposes. The diplomatic setting, reflecting all sensitive features mentioned above, is sensitive ‘par excellence’.

The paper uses functionalism as theoretical framework to indicate why imprecision may be encountered in consecutive interpreting, in diplomatic settings. As it is known, the skopos theory put forward by Vermeer is based on the translation’s being produced “for particular recipients with specific purpose(s) in a given situation” (1989). In the field of diplomacy, the overall skopos of interpreting of diplomatic texts is to establish and maintain desirable international relations, by its very nature. The deviations that occur in practice, in no respect, invalidate the relevant norms and traditions. The texts in this field are generally seen as informative and/or operative texts, as classified by Nord (1997). Introducing the terms, commissioner, commissioner, commissionee, for the very first time, Holz-Mänttari (1984) stated that the interpreter can be regarded as an expert providing an intercultural transfer. According to the skopos given by the commissioner, the interpreters can vary their approach to be target or source-oriented. Changes are made as appropriate in the target text with the aim of providing a sound communication. According to Nord (2006, p. 33), this responsibility is called “loyalty” in the skopos theory, as a replacement for the classical translation studies term “fidelity”. However, in order to act responsibly, interpreters “must be allowed the freedom to decide in co-operation with their clients what is in their best interests.” (Honig, 1998, p. 10)

This paper emphasizes the need to prioritize function, rather than precision, through analysis based on examples in diplomatic settings in consecutive interpreting from English into Turkish and vice versa. The aim is to describe the possible causes for imprecision in consecutive interpreting in diplomatic settings based on the functionalist approach. In what follows, the design of the study will be explained by stating its limitations and explaining corpus selection, and then offer a relevant classification for the reasons of imprecision, though it is not claimed that the classification is exhaustive.

2. Limitations

For the purposes of this study, the cognitive factors causing imprecision in such settings were excluded.

As diplomatic settings require confidentiality, recording is generally not welcomed except for in-house transcription purposes. The strict security measures prevent researchers making use of transcriptions, apart from those published in press. The purpose of the personal inferences made in this paper is purely to denote those issues not mentioned before in literature, and it is recognized that those inferences may be subject to further analysis and interpretation.

Imprecision is as an abstract and complicated issue, and the classification made here is purely to facilitate the analysis, and to indicate that, in regard to diplomatic setting, precision may not be essential or even valuable at all times.

3. Corpus selection

Instances of imprecision were collected as purposive sampling from verbal sources, news, coupled with personal experiences, and classified according to possible causes. For the purposes of this study, we will mainly deal with such constraints leading the interpreter to be imprecise.

4. Possible causes of imprecision in consecutive interpreting in “sensitive” diplomatic settings

The possible causes for these can be classified into 3 main groups: i. Commissioner-originated causes, ii. Commission-originated causes, iii. Commissionee-originated causes.

I. Commissioner-originated causes:

a) Critical attitude of the Commissioner

The Commissioner, generally a diplomat, may speak both languages, but prefer to use an interpreter for two main reasons. Firstly, the use of mother tongue in meetings is considered to be a natural expression of national identity, as well as a marker of solidarity with immediate audience, as remarked by Baker (1997, p. 113). Secondly, the use of mother tongue, and the subsequent use of an interpreter is tactical (Baranyai, 2011) to reduce the time needed to make a critical statement in an effort to avoid drawing attention into a controversial issue.

Furthermore, the commissionee in a diplomatic meeting may be accompanied by subject-specific experts with a command of both languages. In such a situation, the experts may treat the commissionee, critically, rather than taking a cooperative approach. In such cases, feeling strictly monitored by a group of high-ranking experts, the commissionee may functionally, choose to interpret in verbiosity to allow the widest possible interpretation, to avoid such possible criticism, which could be achieved through imprecision.

b) Literal-mindedness

A commissioner without interpreting competence, who is able to speak both languages used, may insist on commissionee’s making a literal interpreting, which would result in imprecision. It exemplifies the situation where the commissioner does not allow the commissionee to act responsibly in translational decisions, as mentioned in the introduction.

In such a case, it may be expected that idiomatic expressions, proverbs etc., would be interpreted, even where the expressions have no counterpart in TL, to ensure communicative equivalence. In a diplomatic meeting, the interpreter, encountering the Turkish proverb “Sütten ağzı yanan yoğurdu üfleyerek yer” (English literal translation of which reads as “one whose mouth is burnt from the milk, eats yogurt by blowing it.) may prefer to give a communicative rendering such as “unpleasant experiences make one more cautious, not remembering “once bitten, twice shy” at that moment under time pressure. But, a commissioner, being a monitoring high-ranking officer, who is “literal-minded”, borrowing Baker’s term (1997) may disapprove such flexibility, and criticize the commissionee for not being precise, as the words “milk and “yogurt” were not interpreted which is necessary in a literal rendering of the proverb.

II. Commission-originated reasons

The commission, diplomatic consecutive interpreting task, in our case, takes place in diplomatic settings which are highly sensitive, highly hierarchical, and, on occasion, televised. Within this framework, imprecision may arise from the following:

a) Diplomatic language

As Schöffner (1997, p. 188) stated, “There is one area of political discourse where we could argue that the speaker wishes to reduce the risk of being criticized for his/ her statements”. So, accordingly, diplomats as commissioners, may be said to prefer to use imprecise language to avoid damaging the national interest. This imprecision may be functionally seen in diplomatic language in the forms of abstract language use (e.g. Aksoy, 2002), ambiguity and particularly, constructive ambiguity (e.g. Kurbalija, 2001; Jönsson, & Hall, 2003; Pehar, 2011), vagueness (Channell, 1994; Di Carlo, 2011; Fjeld, 2001; Jili, 2010), implicitness (Zhang 2014). For an overview of comprehensive descriptions, examples and considerations about these imprecise uses in the translation process, see Yetkin-Karakoç (2016).

b) Top-level participants

The principle of reciprocity brings two high and equivalent-status officials together, who are, more often than not, speaking on behalf of their states, putting great pressure on the commissionee, who consequently may choose to use imprecise expressions in a functional manner, as classified under the commissioner-originated causes in this paper.

c) Environmental noise

Not specific to this setting, this factor also may contribute to the choice of imprecise expressions, when the interpreter is unable to hear part of source statement due to some distraction in the immediate environment.

III. Commissionee-originated causes

a) Uncertainty about an ambiguous term, phrase, issue, event etc.

The commissionee may lack the necessary background information, either because it was not foreseeable that it would arise and/or was kept confidential before the meeting. In such cases, the commissionee may try to save face, by minimizing the loss in meaning. In such a situation, imprecise expressions like umbrella terms, fillers etc. may be applied strategically.

For example, if the commissionee is not sure of the history of an event and the sentence to be interpreted provides no clues, the Turkish sentence may be rearranged, by using “Sözkonusu” in Turkish (“in question” in English), which allows the interpreter to offer two meanings at the same time: i. an event is planned to be held or ii. an event is going to be held. As the parties concerned know the background very well, they will be able to choose the precise reference, therefore, the semantic difficulty is overcome. So, functionally, imprecision here is used for reasons of caution.

b) Textual traditions

If the commissioner makes a statement that is not found to be politically, culturally or diplomatically correct, the commissionee may remain precise, and prefer to say what is appreciated in such cases. For example, if the commissioner, acting as the host in a diplomatic meeting, accidentally neglects the introductory remarks, such as “First of all, it is a great pleasure hosting you here in my office” and directly launches into an important issue, the interpreter may add the statement above, as required by textual traditions.

c) Perceived role conflict

As Bowen et al (1995, p. 273) stated, there are “issues of loyalty (interpreters jumping ship or changing sides), along with breaches of etiquette or even ethics”. The conventional wisdom suggests that if the commissionee works at a particular institution, it is highly likely that the commissionee will be loyal to the institution s/he is affiliated to. A freelance interpreter, ethically, is supposed to reflect both sides’ views impartially. Yet, Özkaya (2015) in her doctoral thesis analyzing the impartiality of conference interpreters in light of translational studies norms, stated that an interpreter may be impartial in some parts of the meeting, but partial in others, which leads her to conclude that impartiality proper may not be an issue in interpreting. It follows that if the commissionee feels impartial, interpretation would be based purely on the words themselves, whereas when s/he feels to be close to a certain party, then some bias might appear in the form of omission or addition in order to appease that party.

d) Highly complex terminology/ semiotic messages/images, leading to mental confusion, usually occurring in novices

For instance, when the official ranks do not coincide across countries, or when the symbols of military ranks are unfamiliar to, or confusing, e.g. brigadier and major general, the novice commissionee may use an imprecise term, say, an umbrella term, e.g. general, to avoid any misleading statement/term etc.

5. Conclusion

This study, by specifying why imprecision is often, and perhaps, inevitably, observed in sensitive diplomatic settings, indicates that it is not possible for precision to be a norm in consecutive interpreting.

The research was made with Turkish-English language pair, but the general conclusion of the unsuitability of maintaining blind faith in precision can readily be applied to any other language pair in the process of interpreting, in such sensitive settings. This study limited itself to preliminary considerations about the possible causes of imprecision witnessed in diplomatic interpreting based on personal experience. As recording during diplomatic meetings is strictly forbidden due to confidentiality issues, except for in-house uses, transcribed data was unavailable. Therefore, in order to avoid a subjective perspective based on purely personal observations and experiences, it is intended to conduct a follow-up study to reinforce the arguments proposed here through interviews with diplomatic interpreters.

6. Suggestions for future studies

Other sensitive settings (legal, religious etc.) as well as other modes of interpretation (sight/ simultaneous interpreting) may be examined in terms of precision and functionalism.

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