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Applying Brown and Levenson's Politeness Theory in Translating Proverb (Im)politeness from English into Arabic

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the problems of impoliteness in the Arabic translation of One Thousand and One English Proverbs translated into Arabic by Omer Jabig. To achieve that aim, the researcher adopts descriptive-qualitative research and a purposive technique in order to select some representative samples. Additionally, this study also adopts the Brown and Levinson's politeness theory in order to analyze such samples under the study. The findings of this study reveal that the translator of the book has committed some translation errors due to the process of applying improper literal-or-free translations, such as the understatement, impersonalization, and the lack of a common ground of the (im)politeness meaning, when it is translated from English into Arabic.

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1. Introduction

Translation is not merely a process of substituting word by word, but it is, in fact, a process of translating equivalent expressions from a source text into a target one, taking into consideration the cultural and social contexts of translating such texts. In fact, proverbs are deemed one of the fixed expressions that have been said in some certain cultural and social contexts. Thus, translators should put such differences between both languages in front of their eyes when rendering them from one language into another. Importantly, one of the thorny issues in translating proverbs is how one can translate the (im)politeness phenomena from English into Arabic, even if such a process of translating leads to some degree of syntactic and semantic alterations of the original text, as it will be discussed shortly.

2. Statement of the problem

As an English/Arabic translator, I have become aware that the translator of the book *One Thousand and One English Proverbs Translate Into Arabic* has committed several translation mismatches. For example, there are several ones in terms of translating the (im)politeness phenomenon from English into Arabic. In fact, some of these errors are serious mistakes that led to distort the original meaning when read in the Arabic context. Thus, this study is an attempt to highlight the phenomenon of (im)politeness in translating proverbs from English into Arabic.

3. Objectives of the study

1. To identify some of the main problems in translating English proverbs into Arabic with reference to (im)politeness phenomenon.
2. To know the reasons beyond such problems in translating English proverbs into Arabic with reference to (im)politeness phenomenon.
3. To assess the selected strategies by the translator in rendering English proverbs into Arabic with reference to (im)politeness phenomenon.

4. Questions of the study

1. What are the most main problems in translating English proverbs into Arabic with reference to (im)politeness phenomenon?
2. What are the reasons beyond such problems in translating English proverbs into Arabic with reference to (im)politeness phenomenon?
3. Are those strategies adopted by the translator suitable ones in translating English proverbs into Arabic with reference to (im)politeness phenomenon?

5. Significance of the study

The current study may increase translators' awareness about addressing the problem of proverbial (im)politeness when being rendered from English into the Arabic. Additionally, it provides some possible insights that may help them to produce a more appropriate translation, particularly in the light of the politeness theory. This paper also draws the attention of translators to some cultural differences when dealing with translating the proverbial (im)politeness from the English language into the Arabic one.

6. Literature Review

In this short review, the researcher addresses two of the most relevant points concerning the politeness concept, particularly Leech's Maxims of Politeness and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Model.

6.1 Leech's Maxims of Politeness:

In 1983, leech presented one of the detailed models based on politeness principles (PP), as following:

- Tact Maxim
 - (a) Minimize cost to other
 - (b) Maximize benefit to other
- Generosity Maxim
 - (a) Minimize benefit to self
 - (b) Maximize cost to self
- Approbation Maxim
 - (a) Minimize dispraise of others
 - (b) Maximize praise of others
- Modesty Maxim
 - (a) Minimize praise of self
 - (b) Maximize dispraise of self
- Agreement Maxim
 - (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other
 - (b) Maximize agreement between self and other
- Sympathy Maxim
 - (a) Minimize antipathy between self and other
 - (b) Maximize sympathy between self and other

(Leech (1983: 132)

Such principles (PP) of politeness have been criticized. For example, Akbari (2014) warns that they may be not "applied for all the cultures" (p. 1195). Therefore, translators should be aware of these cultural differences, when translating from one language into another.

6.2 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Model

Considering one of the comprehensive models (Meyer, 2009), the model of Brown and Levinson addresses politeness strategies, particularly the face notion which is deemed as one of its main concepts. This concept is defined as the self-image of a person that claimed to him/herself, through the need to be approved: a positive face, or the need to be free: a negative face. (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Indeed, such a concept can be divided into the four main strategies: positive, negative, off-record, and don't do FTA strategies, as follows:

6.3 Positive Politeness Strategies:

Brown and Levinson divided the positive politeness into three main branches (Brown and Levinson, 1987:101-129).

1- Claim Common Ground:

A) Convey X interesting:

A speaker can perform such a strategy through noticing the Hearer's wants, exaggerating his interests, or exaggerating his sympathy...

B) Claim in-group membership:

A speaker can also achieve this strategy by using the markers of in-group identity.

C) Claim common:

A speaker can perform such a strategy through seeking agreement, avoiding disagreements, asserting common ground, or telling jokes....

2- Convey that speaker and hearer are cooperators:

A) Indicate that the Speaker takes the hearer's wants into account:

The speaker can perform such a strategy through asserting the concerns of hearer's wants.

B) Claim reflexivity:

Such strategy can be achieved through being optimistic, giving offers, including both the speaker and hearer in conversation and giving or asking for reasons.

D) Claim reciprocity:

Such a strategy can be performed through assuming or asserting reciprocity.

3- Full Hearer's wants:

A speaker can perform such a strategy through giving gifts to the hearer (goods, sympathy or understanding).

6.4 Negative Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson divided negative politeness into five main branches (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129-210), as follows:

1- Be Direct

Direct language is sometimes considered a threat to the hearer's face, so you (speaker) should adopt another strategy to reduce directness in your dialogue such as conventional indirect speaking.

2- Don't presume/assume

The speaker here should assume about the hearer's wants by adopting strategies such as questions, hedges...

3- Do not coerce Hearer

A) give options to the hearer

The speaker can do that through adopting the strategy of being pessimistic about the ability to comply to your request.

B) minimize threats

The speaker also can do that through several strategies such as minimizing the imposition and giving deference to the hearer.

4-Communicate S's want not to impinge on Hearer:

This can be performed through several strategies such as apologizing, impersonalizing or normalizing your sentences.

5-Redress Other Wants of Hearer's

The speaker can achieve that through the strategy of expressing his acceptance s to the hearer.

6.5 Off-Record Strategies

In these strategies, the speaker can use indirect language and make the hearer interpret the message in his own.

Such strategies are divided by Brown and Levinson into two main branches (Brown and Levinson,1987:211-227).

1- Invite Conversational Implicatures:

This can be done through adopting several strategies to make indirect language such as giving hints, understating and being ironic...

2- Be vague or ambiguous:

This also can be done through adopting several strategies such as being ambiguous, using ellipsis overgeneralize.

7. Methodology

7.1 Type of research.

This study adopts a descriptive-qualitative approach. In fact, such a method "offers the opportunity to gather rich descriptions about a phenomenon which little may be known about" (Bradshaw, Atkinson & Doody, 2017: 3). It also helps one to "gain a straightforward and comprehensive understanding, which, in turn, may yield impactful findings that may contribute to change and/or new knowledge or serve as a foundation for larger-scale studies" (Villamin, Lopez, Thapa and Cleary 2025, p 5192). Thus, this design may be considered suitable for this present study, for the researcher does not only address the (im)politeness phenomenon in details, but also, he attempts to highlight the problem of quality in translating impoliteness issues of proverbs from English into Arabic.

7.2 Data collection and Sampling

The data of the study was selected from the book *One Thousand and One English Proverbs translated into Arabic* by Omer Jabig. Indeed, the study sample was purposively selected by carefully examining the context of the source text to identify the main problems pertaining to the face-threatening acts at the word, phrase or a sentence level. Then purposively selecting this representative sample is out of the several impoliteness shifts found in the book of the study.

7.3 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, this present study adopts the concept of face by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory which is interested in the "self-image" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61) that is claimed by a person to himself in order to be accepted (a positive face), or to be autonomous (a negative face). The researcher, here, tries to select some face-threatening acts concerning impoliteness shifts, and redress them in according to sup- and super-strategies of face (see, sections, 6.3-6.5)

Specifically speaking, he compares proverbs in the sample with their target translation pertaining (im)politeness shifts, and then he attempts to suggest a suitable face-saving act which was not considered by the translator when rendering those proverbs from English into Arabic.

8. Analysis

The first example:

Little thieves are hanged, but great ones escape.

اللصوص الصغار يتعاقبون و الكبار يفرّون من العقاب (ص. 42)

In this example, the English proverb uses the verb *hang*, which is translated as يعاقب, while it originally means يشنق. Thus, the former meaning understates the concept of theft punishment in Arabic through applying the off-record strategy. In addition, the translator should not stick to word-by-word translation in his process of rendering the meaning of this proverb, Thus the following translation could be suggested:

يشنق اللصوص الضعفاء، ويفر الأقوياء

The second example.

After us the deluge.

نحن و من بعدنا الطوفان. (أنا و من بعدي الطوفان) (ص. 12).

This example is translated with two alternatives, the first translation is نحن و من بعدنا الطوفان, and the second is أنا و من بعدي الطوفان. Obviously, the former one is more polite expression than the later, because it uses the plural pronoun نحن, while the former uses the single pronoun أنا. In other words, the plural pronoun above can create a common ground, because of focusing on the group than on the individuality.

The third example

Respect yourself, or no one else will respect you.

من يحترم نفسه يحترمه الناس (59)

He that respects not is not respected.

من لا يحترم الآخرين لا أحد يحترمه (38).

In examining the two examples above, the first sentence in English is imperative, while the second one is affirmative. However, both Arabic translations are affirmative sentences. Indeed, the translation of the first sentence with an imperative one in Arabic will be more appropriate, since it can notice the hearer's want and emphasize his/her interest. In doing so, such an imperative sentence is considered a more polite one, because it is for the hearer's benefit.

The fourth example

United we stand, divided we fall.

في الاتحاد قوة وفي التفرقة ضعف (ص.76).

In this example, the translator uses an impersonalization strategy, while there is not, in fact, a threat to the hearer. Contrarily, he should personalize in order to include both the speaker and hearer. In doing so, he will increase the polite meaning of solidarity and unity in the context of the present proverb. Thus, a translation equivalence is suggested as follows:

في اتحادنا قوة، وفي فرقتنا ضعف.

The fifth example

Something is rotten the state of Denmark

هناك فضيحة (رديلة) في البلد (ص. 60).

In the above example, the translator omits the state of (Denmark) in the Arabic translation. And such a change on the semantic meaning can provide a polite translation through generalizing the proverbial meaning in the target language. On the other hand, it is also more appropriate for the Arabic context, because the Arabic reader does not have the general background of the story in which the proverb has been said. Thus, the omission of in-group expressions is maybe considered a kind of polite technique, which is adopted by the translator.

9. Conclusion

The study finding revealed that while the translator under the study could sometimes achieve the politeness phenomenon when translating from English into Arabic (see, the fifth example), he also sometimes failed to achieve such a phenomenon. For example, he understated the polite meaning of the translated proverbs, does not create the common ground with his/her speaker, or does not sometimes notice the wants of the speaker. Such (im)politeness mismatches above, indeed, occur either by adopting literal or free techniques. Thus, translators should attempt to achieve the impoliteness phenomenon in translating proverbs by selecting the appropriate strategies: the literal or free translation, even if the latter process can lead to some degree of syntactic and semantic alterations of the original text.

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تطبيق نظرية براون وليفنسون للتأدب على ترجمة أمثال عدم التأدب من الإنجليزية إلى العربية

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليل إشكالية عدم التأدب في الترجمة العربية لكتاب "ألف مثل ومثل مترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية" لعمر جبق. وقد تبنت هذه الدراسة المنهج الكمي-الوصفي، والطريقة القصدية في اختيار عينة الدراسة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبنت هذه الدراسة أيضا نظرية براون وليفنسون (1987) من أجل تحليل عينة الدراسة.

وتظهر نتائج الدراسة أن مترجم الكتاب وقع في بعض الأخطاء الترجيمية، وذلك يعود إلى تبني تقنيات حرة أو حرفية غير ملائمة، مثل خفض التقدير وغياب الشخصية وغياب الأرضية المشتركة عند نقل عدم التأدب من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية.

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