LOST IN TRANSLATION: PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING INDONESIAN AND ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS INTO GERMAN

Deddy Kurniawan & Rosyidah
State University of Malang

Abstract

In translation, an equivalent communicative effect will be more difficult to attain, as the cultural distance between the receivers of the source and target text is greater. This may lead into what is termed as a problem of untranslatability. Cultural distance between the receivers of the source and the target text can cause some problems in translating. Sometimes is necessary to omit some features having a little or no textual relevance in a given source text. It means sacrificing less relevant textual details and maintaining more relevant ones to attain a maximum equivalent communicative effect. The paper discusses some issues related to the problems in translation, especially the phenomena that appear in the German translation from Indonesian and English expressions.

Keywords: *problem in translation, Indonesian translation, German translation*

Introduction

Bob Harris is a middle-aged American movie star just arrived in Tokyo to film commercials for a Scotch whiskey. Jet-lagged, unable to sleep, and unable to connect with Japanese culture, he spends time in the hotel bar, where he meets Charlotte. That is the story of *Lost in Translation*, motion picture nominated for an Academy Award for best picture of 2003. Director Sofia Coppola won an Oscar for best original screenplay. The film also garnered nominations for Coppola for best director and for Bill Murray for best actor.

The story above shows us how important understanding the language of the other culture in which we are dealing with. In this case, translation plays an important role as well. Therefore, translation, language, and culture are inseparable. Translation could be one of the gates entering the new horizon of culture and knowledge.

When we access *Yahoo!* Germany for the first time, we are offered to continue the access with the new *Yahoo!* platform by clicking hyperlink on these words "*Zum Fortfahren mit dem brandneuen Yahoo!*" (Yahoo!, 2009). For most German netters it seems that there is nothing wrong with these words, as if they would say, "*Alles in Ordnung!*", that's all right! But in fact, the standard German doesn't recognize that expression since it is direct translation from English expression "To continue with the brand-new Yahoo!" The informal German word '*brandneu*' was probably borrowed from the formal English word 'brand-new', since the German word '*Brand*' originally has the same meaning with 'fire, blaze, etc' (Richter, 2006). In this case, the translator might have translated a formal English expression into an informal German expression to attain an equivalent communicative effect. In other words, the formal style has *lost in translation* – this term is actually different from the original meaning of the motion picture's title *Lost in Translation*.

In translation, an equivalent communicative effect is all the more difficult to attain, the greater the cultural distance between the receivers of the source and

target text. This is termed problem of translatability. In this paper, discussions center on the problems in translating Indonesian and English expressions into the German equivalents. Furthermore, this paper is divided into two sections. The first section consists of some issues related to the problems in translation. While the second section focuses on the phenomena that appear in the German translation from Indonesian and English expressions.

Problems in Translation

Definition and Sorts of Translation

In the broad sense, translation is the process of rendering written language that was produced in one language (the source language) into another (the target language), or the target language version that results from this process (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). In foreign-language instruction, translation is considered to be a 'fifth skill' next to the traditional 'four skills' of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Translation is a method used to practice and test competence and performance in a second language (Bussmann, 2006). While Lefevere (ed) (2003) explained that translations can be made for two reasons. One is to learn languages and to improve one's style. This is what pupils do in school when they translate from their mother tongue into another language, to prove that they have understood the text, at least in part. The other reason is to explain a text to those who do not understand it.

Translation in which more emphasis is given to overall meaning than to exact wording is known as free translation. A translation that approximates to a word -for-word representation of the original is known as a literal translation. The terms *translation* and *interpretation* are often used interchangeably. While both activities involve transferring a message between two different languages, translation refers to transfer between written texts and interpretation refers to spoken discourse and the direct transfer of a spoken message from one language to another. In this case, the translators often find problems in transferring exact meaning from the source language into the target language (Bussmann, 2006).

Translation and Cultures

Lefevere (ed) (2003) stated clearly that problems in translating are caused at least as much by discrepancies in conceptual and textual grids as by discrepancies in languages. The problems become particularly apparent when translation takes place between two different cultures. This brings us, of course, straight to the most important problem in all translating and in all attempts at cross-cultural understanding.

The translator and the interpreter move between disciplines, between the language and culture (Cronin, 2000). Some argue that translation is primarily about language, not culture. Of course translation scholars must focus on language, for translation is about transferring a text from one language to another. But separating language from culture is like the old debate about which came first – the chicken or the egg.

Translation and Translator

Colina proposed that the translator should have *communicative translational competence* (Baer and Coby (eds), 2003). Kiraly (1990) defined *communicative translational competence* as the "ability to interact appropriately and adequately as an active participant in communicative translation tasks". In other words, it includes the ability to take into account a source text in its context, the requirements for the translation assignment, and the participants in the process (commissioner of the translation, author, intended audience, etc.) in order to produce a target text that is adequate to the needs of the assignment and the target context. In addition, translation is a special type of communicative competence that requires interlingual and intercultural communicative competence

(Wilss, 1976).

Bell (1991) proposed a model of "translator communicative competence" which he defines as "the knowledge and ability possessed by the translator which permits him/her to create communicative acts — discourse — which are not only (and not necessarily) grammatical … but socially acceptable. While *Communicative competence* is defined by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory as the ability to interpret, express, negotiate meaning. Savignon (1983) proposes that communicative competence consists of four competences: grammatical competence (knowledge of the structure and form of language), discourse competence (knowledge of the rules of cohesion and coherence across sentences and utterances), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the rules of interaction), and strategic competence (knowing how to make the most of the language that you have, especially when it is deficient).

Translation as Process

The processes of translation are not different from familiar things that everyone does every day. Comprehension and interpretation are processes that we all perform whenever we listen to or read a piece of linguistically imparted information. However, one everyday activity that does resemble translation proper is called 'inter-semiotic translation' (Jakobson, 1971), that is, translation between two semiotic systems (systems for communication). 'The green light means go' is an act of inter-semiotic translation. In this case, there is translation from a non-linguistic communication system to a linguistic one. To this extent, everyone is a translator of a sort. Still more common are various sorts of linguistic response to linguistic stimuli that are also very like translation proper, even though they actually take place within a single language, for example returning a greeting correctly, answering a question satisfactorily, or filling in a form. These sorts of process are what Jakobson (1971) calls 'intralingual translation'. Translation as a process is what the translator actually does, the way which s/he passes step by step to obtain the result. It concerns with the procedures and methods that s/he uses and the reasons that s/he chooses certain terms in translation (Machali, 2000).

Choosing the terms in translation requires any translator to comprehend various meanings that are used in both source text and target text. S/he should be aware that comprehension and interpretation are the basic steps in translation which involve meanings, transferring communicative effects from one language into another. The translator should keep the textual meaning as far as possible, but s/he could use the contextual meaning, if it is necessary. Therefore, we should know the motto of translation: "*So treu wie möglich, so frei wie nötig*"; "As loyal as possible, as free as necessary".

Lost in Translation

Many of the English and Indonesian texts contain constructions that can not go into German without grammatical transposition. For example, idiomatic English and Indonesian constructions that it is easiest to overlook as possible options when translating from German, particularly when the source text structure can be replicated in English. But the (Indonesian or English) translator may stumble over these structures in translating *into* German.

Hervey, *et al*. (2006) stated that the salient features of a text can be said to be its most *relevant* ones, those that have significant communicative function. Carefully planned translating means prioritizing the cultural, generic, formal, semantic and stylistic properties of the source according to two things: their relative textual relevance, and the amount of attention they should receive in translation. The aim is to deal with translation loss in as rational and systematic way as possible and to avoid incomplete translation, that

is, completely loss of both textual and contextual aspects of the source language in the target ones (Bassnett and Trivedi (eds), 2002).

This implies being prepared, *if necessary*, to lose features that have little or no textual relevance in a given source text, sacrificing less relevant textual details to more relevant ones. In line with Hervey's statement, Baer and Coby (eds) (2003) opined that the translator's work is guided by the communicative purpose of ensuring that the target reader can access those components of the source message that are necessary to accomplish the communicative goal of the translation.

From Indonesian and English into German

It is impossible to translate Indonesian and English expressions into German without losing some language aspects. In this case, Port (2002) stated that literal translation is impossible because (1) *idioms* that have obvious meaning in one language and culture may be completely confusing to speakers from another language and culture; (2) *grammatical particles* (like articles, genders, verb tenses, case markers, singular/dual/plural, etc) *do not exist in every language* leading to multiple ambiguities (from the perspective of a source language like English and Indonesian); and (3) a *single word* in one language often *has meanings that require several words* in another language.

Idioms

Translation is about language, but translation is also about culture, for the two are inseparable. Thus, mastering a foreign language is not only about the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, but also idioms which are formed by the culture in which the language is spoken. These are phrase etc. established by usage and not immediately comprehensible from the words used. If someone, for example in German, does not notice something, s/he has *"Tomaten auf den Augen"* (Tomatoes on the eyes). But s/he has *"Bohnen in den Ohren"* (Beans in the ears), if s/he does not hear something.

Thousands of such idiomatic expressions exist in every language. Mostly these can not be translated literarily. For example, the English expression "He gives me the hump" would be translated into German *"Er gibt mir einen Buckel"* or *"Er macht mir einen Buckel"*. But German speakers may not understand those translations since that English expression is, actually, equivalent to the German expression *"Er fällt mir auf den Wecker!"* which sounds funny, if it is translated into English: "He's falling on my clock". Another example, the Indonesian expression *"Senjata makan tuan"* (word-for-word translated: "The weapon eats the owner") has a similar meaning to the English expression "to make a bull" or "to make a boner". These expressions are equivalent to the German expression *"einen Bock schießen"* which is literarily translated as "to shoot a buck".

Gender

We know that all nouns in Indonesian and English have no gender marker, differ from French and German. But it would not be very difficult to translate a noun into German since each noun has the equivalent. The problem occurs, when we translate proper names into German. Which genders do Indonesian or English buildings and places? Is it *der* (masculine), *die* (feminine), or *das* (neuter) Borobudur? And what about the London Bridge; is it *der*, *die*, or *das* London-Bridge? Is there any rule for this problem?

Das or *die* London-Bridge remains in dispute. But we must consider carefully that all aspects in translation must agree with those in the target language, i.e. grammar and meaning. One question left: should we therefore to do research for the gender of every building in the world?

Both in Indonesian and English buildings are basically neuter (pronoun: *it*

(English), *ini*, *itu* (Indonesian). However, in German we should not say "*das* Liberty" nor "*das* Royal-Albert-Hall", neither "das London-Bridge" nor "*das* Borobudur". Obviously, we must use the article agreed with the German words: *die* Liberty (*die Freiheitsstatue*), *die* Royal-Albert-Hall (*die Halle*), *die* London-Bridge (*die Brücke*), and *der* Borobudur (*der Tempel*).

Anglicism and 'Denglish'

Anglicism is defined by Oxford University (1994) as peculiarly English word or custom. While *Denglish* is, short for *Deutsch-Englisch*, known as a kind of German slang which is much interfered with the English structure and vocabulary.

What is Anglicism exactly? In German, words such as "Sale", "U-Turn", and "Chicken Wings" are English foreign words. Anglicism is something different. It is known as a linguistic pattern which is adopted from English and at the first glance not recognized as English at all. An expression, for example, *"Der frühe Vogel fängt den Wurm"* is an Anglicism. It originated from the translation of an English expression ("The early bird catches the worm") and seems to appear later as German wisdom. The German equivalent is absolutely different: *"Wer zuerst kommt, mahlt zuerst."* ("First come, first served").

The phrase "*das meint*" which is more often heard is an Anglicism as well. The pattern for this construction is the English idiom "that means". Who translates "*that means*" into "*das meint*" is not aware of the meaning difference between "*Bedeutung*" (English "meaning") and "*Meinung*" (English "opinion"). The conjugated verb "*meint*" means "to opine" and correctly used as in this sentence: "*Sie meint, dass jeder unsere Umwelt schutzen sollte.*" ("She opines that everyone should save our environment").

Once, the CEO of a tire manufacturer in Germany blamed the labor union that it would treat him as bogeyman, "*um sich am Ende des Tages von der Globalisierung abzukapseln.*" ("finally, in order to shut itself off from the globalization."). The English metaphor "at the end of the day" means "finally", "ultimately". For the most German, "*Ende des Tages*" has no rhetorical figure; it is not anything else but "evening". The usage in term of "finally" or "ultimately" is an Anglicism.

Mostly, the Anglicism forms of the present day are obviously Americanism since they have not been borrowed from the British English, but American English. Not only linguists those who register Americanism forms, but also agriculturists, foresters, and biology teachers use those forms in their fields.

Conclusion

The problems in translating appear because of, one of the reasons, the cultural distance between the receivers of the source and the target text. Facing this problem, the translator should know that the translation should be prepared, *if necessary*, to lose features that have little or no textual relevance in a given source text, sacrificing less relevant textual details to more relevant ones. For instance, in translating Indonesian and English expressions into the German equivalents, some language aspects may be, in our term, *lost in translation* to attain an equivalent communicative effect.

Nowadays, since most reports of international relevancy come from the sources which are written or spoken in English, the works of German journalists mostly appear in form of translation. Therefore, it is difficult to detach the English pattern from those works. The journalists attach it to the original text and translate it word by word without any further question, whether or not one could say it in German. This usually leads to curios misunderstanding and extremely individual word creation.

Some innovations in German, for example *Denglish*, are influenced by incorrect translated constructions from English.

Many people, especially public figures, more and more use them in their speeches or conversations. Recently, the expanding use of English has obviously affected some of the Indonesian junior translators in translating Indonesian expressions into German by using English patterns. Understanding the problems in translation is one of the most important things to acquire the communicative translational competence, especially for the students and the junior translators.

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