

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN TRANSLATION: SEMANTIC IMPLICATIONS

Nwachukwu Emmanuel
School of Languages,
Yobe State College of Education Gashua.
Yobe State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper discusses the semantic implications of contextual factors in translation. It is of the view that in translation, the meaning of a text or utterance is of cardinal importance as opposed to the structural resemblance of the source text to the realized version. It argues that context plays a vital role in deciphering the meaning of a text, which in turn ensures the achievement of fidelity and exactitude which are the hallmarks of translation. It points out that context which could be seen as all the factors that play a role in producing and understanding utterances could be divided into three typologies which include immediate context which has to do with the inter-relationship which exists between the keyword and the neighboring lexical items in a sentence. This inter-relationship in turn contributes immensely in alleviating the problems posed by polysemous words. The second is the wider or enlarged context which has to do with the idea or meaning that comes to mind with the expansion or widening of the discourse and lastly situational context which is perceived as all forms of extra-linguistic factors which in one way or

the other affect the determination of the meaning of a text or utterance. In consideration of the above, the paper counsels that contextual factors ought to be given adequate attention in the practice of translation.

Introduction

The art of translation came into existence as a solution to the linguistic incommunicability existing between persons of diverse tongues. It could be seen as the art of rendering into the target language the message of the source text devoid of all forms of adulterations, that is to say the said message ought to adhere strictly as much as possible to the original text.

In consideration of the enormous difficulties which are confronted in the process of translation, one may not be far from the truth to infer that the art of translation should not be conceived as a child's play or an all comers affair. This is in contradistinction with the widely held view that bilingualism is enough tool to make one a competent translator. The establishment of national schools of translation to adequately train would be translators adds weight to the above argument that the knowledge of two languages is not enough criterion to make one a competent translator. It is worthy of note that there exists some other linguistic and extra-linguistic concepts which one ought to be at home with in a bid to realize a worthwhile and acceptable job. It is imperative to point out that in order to translate effectively, one ought to understand or first and

foremost comprehend the message of the source text. We can say that understanding the meaning of a text is the pivot upon which all forms of fidelity and exactitude which are the watchwords of translation revolve. Worthy of note also is the fact that contextual analysis is a sine qua non towards the comprehension of a text or utterance. Giving credence to the above assertion, Ndimele argues that:

Communication experts have now come to realize that context is indispensable in accounting for certain facts about meaning in the human communication system. For the hearer to properly decipher the meaning of the speaker's utterance, he must be able to refer to the assumptions about the social context of the utterance, as well as other implicit assumptions that underlie the utterance (44).

In this vein, one may say that context plays a very vital role in the communication arena in general and translation process in particular.

Conceptual definitions

For a better understanding of this paper, some concepts which we shall be employing in the course of this write up ought to be defined operationally. These concepts include: context, translation and semantics.

Context according to Mey (2007) could be seen as all the factors that play a role in producing and understanding utterances. He continues by saying that context is dynamic, not a static concept, it is to be understood as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense that enable the participants in the communication process to interact and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible.

It is noteworthy that the term ‘translation’ has no universally accepted definition which could be seen as being all encompassing. The resultant effect of such a situation is the existence of multifarious definitions of this concept. Each author or writer tends to approach it from his or her own perspective. Newmark (1976) is of the opinion that translation consists in “an attempt to replace a written message in one language by the same message in another language. For Anyanwu (1997), translation could be seen as “the rendering in writing of a source language text into the target language with a view to preserving as much as possible the source language message and style”.

The two definitions could be seen as having two or three issues in common viz: translation has to do with the interaction of two languages and secondly it is concerned with a written document. It is as regards the second point that we could pitch a hole or omission, that is to say restricting translation to written document. It could be observed that translation could be equated with a coin of

two faces viz translation proper which is concerned with written documents ; and interpretation which is concerned with oral work. Against this background, our paper takes the two forms into consideration.

The term semantics according to Saeed (2007) is the study of meaning communicated through language. In his own conception, Ndimele (2007) sees semantics as an area of linguistics which studies the meaning of words and sentences in language. It could be argued that though the term ‘semantics’ came to limelight not quite long (in the first half of the 20th century to be precise), this does not suggest that the study of meaning is a recent development. It could be argued that semantics is at the centre of all communication processes. Ndimele (op cit) sums it up when he says that, ‘understanding the intended meaning of an expression is the core of the communication process’.

Translation, Meaning and Context

Since translation is above all, an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given linguistic discourse from one language to another, rather than the words or grammatical structures of the original language, it may be worthwhile to x-ray some of the recent developments in the field of the study of ‘meaning’ or ‘semantics’. Our major interest in this regard is in the shift of emphasis from the referential or dictionary meaning to contextual or pragmatic meaning of a concept. Such a shift one may say represents a significant development

particularly relevant to translation studies. It may be imperative to first and foremost x-ray the reasons why earlier scholars opted to pay little or no attention to the concept of context in communication studies. To this regard, Ndimele (2007) advances the following reasons as to why context was excluded in the study of semantics:

it was claimed that there were certain theoretical as well as practical difficulties in dealing with context satisfactorily since there was (and possibly is) no objective way of dealing with context as regards its influence on meanings, it was felt that context should be excluded from any empirical investigation of the factors of the human communication system.

It was believed that context had no significance in human communities since the meaning of a sentence (in terms of whether it was ambiguous, contradictory, anomalous) could be determined in spite of context). It has also been argued that the meaning of a sentence is independent of the context in which it is used. After all, an individual already knows the meaning of a sentence prior to its occurrence in a given context; put in another way, context or no context a speaker of a language ought to know the different meanings of all the normal expressions in his language even before he uses them in a concrete situation. There is also an argument that the study of meaning can progress uninterruptedly without taking any contextual factors into consideration.

Though a number of linguists are in support of the above propositions, being skeptical of the need of putting contextual factors into consideration in an exercise that involves the study of meaning in communication. Modern day researchers such as Ireka (2014), Niladri (2000) and Clifton (2005) are in agreement that context is a *sine qua non* in the study of meaning in communication (translation studies inclusive). Apart from context, Bally (1951) in an early research included situation, mimique and intonation under a broad umbrella of what he called “*les entourage d’un fait d’expression*”. The meaning of a word or set of words is best understood as the contribution that word or phrase can make to the meaning or function of the whole sentence or linguistic utterance where that word or phrase occurs. The meaning of a given word is governed not only by the external object or idea that a particular word is supposed to refer to but also by the use of that particular word or phrase in a particular way in a particular context and to a particular effect.

In a bid to have an adequate knowledge of the semantic implications of context in translation, we have decided to classify context under three typologies with examples of how they impact on translation.

Types of Contexts and Their Impacts on Translation

A study on the classification of contexts reveals that various authors have approached the typologies of contexts from different perspectives.

Dash (2000) classifies contexts into sentential context which he says refers to the immediate environment of the key word, focusing on its neighboring and distant members in a sentence, the topical context which he says refers to the topic of the text where the key word has occurred as well as the global context which according to him refers to the information deducible from the external world. For Correard (2003), context is classified into general context and proximate context.

In contrast to the observation of the above cited scholars, we have identified three types of contexts that can assist in understanding the actual meaning of a word in an utterance as such play vital role in the translation process. The three types of contexts are: immediate context, wider or enlarged context and situational context. While the first two viz: immediate context and wider context fall under linguistic factors, situational context could be seen as being extra-linguistic in nature. We shall further elaborate on each of them with examples.

Immediate Context

As the name implies, the term immediate context has to do with the inter-relationship which exists between the lexical item or items that immediately precede the key word as well as those that immediately follow it. This inter-relationship plays an invaluable role in alleviating problems posed by polysemous words in an utterance. Verschuren (1981) supporting the above assertion argues that:

Within the sphere of structural semantics, it is a unique network of syntactically related members within which each member derives its meaning from the interface of its semantic-syntactic relation with other members

It may be imperative to point out that words in isolation often present a variation in meanings, once inserted in a particular context, such polysemous characteristics is often resolved and such a lexical item can be reduced to a particular meaning. In this regards, Dash (2014) maintains that:

.....context carries tremendous importance in disambiguation of meaning as well as in understanding the actual meaning of words. Therefore, understanding the context becomes an important task in the area of applied linguistics, lexical semantics, cognitive linguistics as well as in other areas of linguistics as context triggers variation of meaning and supplies valuable information to understand why and how a particular word varies in meaning when used in a piece of text

Such situations of polysemy often pose great difficulty to the translator in realizing an acceptable version. Consider the following examples as to how the

immediate context assists in unveiling the particular meaning of a lexical item. Our examples are sentential based:

- (a) Pierre a une grosse tête.
- (b) Pierre est le tête de l'Armée Nigérian.
- (c) Pierre fait la tête a son chef.

The translated versions of the above texts are as follows:

- (a) Peter has a big head.
- (b) Peter is the commander of the Nigerian Army.
- (c) Peter is disobedient to his boss.

In the above texts, it is the immediate context that is to say the interaction or the relationship existing between the lexical items that has assisted us in understanding the various applications of the word “tête” in the three sentences as such we are able to realize proper translation of the sentences in the target language. It may be necessary to point out that the word “tête” in isolation means “head”. In this vain, the context in which it occurs has gone a long way to reveal that translating it as head in the three sentences will be misleading and is bound to result to a faulty translation.

In the following sentences:

- (a) Les ouvriers font un pont.
- (b) Les ouvriers font greve.

Here also the inter-relationship between the lexical items preceding and following the key word “font” has gone a long way in assisting us to understand that the keyword “font” in the first sentence should be translated as ‘make’ or ‘construct’, that is to say the sentence could be translated as :

‘The workers are making or constructing a bridge’.

On the other hand, the same lexical item “font” in the second sentence cannot be translated as ‘make’ or ‘construct’. According to the immediate context, the appropriate translation should be:

“The workers are striking or The workers are on strike”.

From the above illustrations, we can come to terms with the fact that a lexical item when used in a piece of text usually denotes only one meaning out of multiple meanings which it inherently carries. The general observation is that it is the immediate context that determines which meaning of the lexical item should be taken into consideration.

Wider or Enlarged Context.

Wider or enlarged context has to do with the syntactic operation which involves further addition of lexical items in the course of sentence formation to arrive at a complete and meaningful utterance. This has to do with the idea or meaning that comes to mind with the expansion or further widening of the discourse. It is worthy of note that with the utterance of the initial lexical item, or utterance, the reader or listener may often find it difficult to

understand or make out meaning from what the speaker aims at communicating. It is with the widening or expansion of the sentence via further addition of words that one can actually be able to make out proper sense from an utterance. The following sentence to be translated to French elaborates this concept:

‘The man kicked the bucket yesterday, he is to be buried today’.

According to the context, one can understand that the man in question did not physically ‘kick the bucket’, this position is made possible by the wider context that is the addition of ‘he is going to be buried today’. In translating the above text to French language, the appropriate translation ought to be

L’homme est mort hier, on va l’enterré aujourd’hui.

The implication of the above situation is that in translation process, one ought to read the text to be translated in its entirety before venturing into the translation proper. The above observation is anchored on the fact that some clues may be attached to the wider context which shall assist the translator to make out the appropriate meaning of the text or utterance thereby making it easier for him to achieve the doctrines of fidelity and exactitude which are the hallmarks of translation.

Situational Context

Situational context could be described as all forms of extra-linguistic factors which affect the determination of

the meaning of an utterance or text. The term situational context encompasses a whole lot of things which in one way or the other impact on the meaning derivable from an utterance or text. It may be necessary to point out that generally, a huge chunk of information of the situational context is available from the external world that supplies the vital cues of place, time, interpretation, geography, society, culture, religion and various other things. Since the situational context builds up a cognitive interface between language and reality, we often refer to it to understand; who says, what is said, to whom it is said, when it is said, where it is said, why it is said, how it is said etc. against this background, one may not be far from the truth to say that situational context remains a valuable source of information for meaning disambiguation of words and subsequently the achievement of accurate translation.

Conclusion

Our study so far has revealed that communication experts have come to terms with the fact that context is indispensable in accounting for certain facts about meaning in translation and human communication in general. To this end, it has become obvious that accurate meanings of certain assertions cannot often be realized without cognizance to the contextual factors in which such assertions occur.

Against this background, it is advised that attention should be paid to the contextual meanings of utterances in

translation activities. It is worthy of note that it is usually easier to find the conceptual or logical meaning of a given word but that type of meaning is not always telling in the case of translation, thus this confers on translation studies the status of a specialized field. The translator must therefore look for a target language utterance that has an equivalent communicative function, regardless of its formal resemblance to the original utterance as far as the formal structure is concerned. Translation has to be carried out in the way the given linguistic system is used for actual communication purposes, not on the level of referential meaning or the formal sentence structure. Conveying the textual effect of the original is the final objective to which a translator aspires. This inarguably cannot be achieved by sweeping contextual factors under the carpet.

Works Cited

- Anyanwu, P.A. (1997) Phonology in the Broadcast Media: The State of the Art. In The language Professional. Anyaehie, E . (ed) Owerri, Fasmen Educational and Research Publications
- Clifton, P. (2009) “Semantics- The Study of Word and Sentence Meaning” (Ling 107) pyers@ku.edu. The Ohio State University.
- Corredrd, M.H. Traduire avec un Dictionnaire, traduire pour un Dictionnaire.

- “Teaching Translation: Problems and Solutions” in Boullon, P and Busa, F. (eds). *The Language of Word Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dash, N.S (2000) *The Role of Context in Sense Variation: Introducing Corpus Linguistics in Indian Contexts*. Language in India.
- Ireka, F.I. (2013) *Difficulties in the Translation of Technical Texts: Example of La bourse en veut-elle à la Croissance*.
- Mey, J.L. (2007) *Pragmatics: An Introduction* . United Kingdom, Blackwell Publishing (2nd edition)
- Ndimele, O.M (2007) *Semantics and the Frontiers of Communication*. Port Harcourt, University of Port Harcourt press. (Second edition)
- Newmark, P.(1976) “A Tentative Preface to Translation Methods: Principles and Procedures” in *Audio Visual Language Journal*.
- Saeed, J.I. (2007) *Semantics*. United Kingdom. Blackwell Publishing. (second edition)