# Form and Meaning in Transcultural Communication: An Overview of a Practical Translation Process

Tangyie Evani

*University of Dschang, Department of General Studies, Institute of Technology- Bandjoun -Cameroon*

**Abstract-The first object of any translation activity, over and beyond the pleasure it may give is, to serve the purpose of effective communication not just a semantic restitution for the target language readership, but a duly conceived attempt to give the target text consumer insights to a better understanding of the message conveyed. Whereas, a better understanding in translation is streamed down to form and meaning which are directly integrated in the dynamics of the language itself. How can the process of transcultural communication highlight the relevance of form and meaning to achieve ethical prominence in translation and why should such considerations underpin translations within this era of globalisation?**

**This study analysis some situations of inadvertent transcultural communication gaps as observed in the use of form and meaning from an ethnographic perspective while proposing at the same time pointers on how to translate critically for effective cross-cultural communication. The purpose is to highlight basic linguistic factors involved in translating a text from a source language into a target language as a trans-cultural communication.**

**Key words: communication, diversity, form, language, meaning, semantics, transcultural, translation.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Developing trans-cultural Proficiency in diverse translation settings has been studied by examining the distinction between literary interpersonal translation skills and cognitive cultural translation proficiency. This distinction, originally proposed by linguist Jim Cummins, relates to current trends in global translation approaches. A review of the literature was conducted and integrated with information obtained by interviewing local language arts specialists to assess how different translators conceptualize trans-cultural communication and semantic appropriateness. The subsequent analysis portrays how a distinctive form shapes meaning in real translation processes from the premise that various cultural factors affect cross-semantic mappings.

It is generally acknowledged within the discipline of translation that one form may express a variety of meanings and that a single meaning may be expressed in a variety of forms. The implication here stated is that even within a simple language, there are great varieties of ways in which form expresses meaning. Whereas, it is only when a form is used in its primary meaning or function that there is a one-to-one correlation between form and meaning. The other meanings are secondary or figurative meanings. The reason supporting this statement ties to the fact that words have extended meanings and in the same way, grammatical forms have extended usage (secondary & figurative).

This characteristic of *skewing* that is, the diversity or lack of one-to one correlation between form and meaning is the basic reason that makes translation a complicated task.

If there were no skewing, then all lexical items and grammatical forms would have only one meaning, and a literal word-for-word and grammatical structure-for-grammatical structure translation would be possible. But the fact is that, a language is a coupled set of skewed relationships between meaning (semantics) and form (lexicon and grammar). Each language has its own distinctive forms for representing meaning to be expressed in another language by a very different form.

Therefore, to translate the form of one language literally according to the corresponding form in another language would often change the meaning or at least result in a form which is unnatural, thus the second language meaning must have priority over form in translation. It is the meaning that is to be carried over from source language not the linguistic form. Consider the statement *He is cold hearted* which in a general sense means he is infecting no emotional sympathy, it would be difficult to translate into another language unless the source language and the receptor

language are closely related languages from the source language family, without which, it is not likely that there will be much corresponding of form between the source text and the translation.

The nature of language is that each language uses different forms and these forms have secondary and figurative meanings which add further complications. A word-for-word translation which follows closely the form of the source language or literal translation is usually conducted if one is studying the structure of the source text as in interlinear translation, but a literal translation does not communicate the meaning of the source text. It is generally no more than a string of words intended to help someone read a text in its original language (local language syntax) and is unnatural, hard to understand, and often seems to be quite meaningless or even give a wrong meaning in the receptor language. This kind of juxtaposition can hardly be called a translation as the goal of a translation is to produce a receptor language text which is idiomatic; that is, one which has the same meaning as the source language but is expressed in the natural form of the receptor language. This is said with the understanding that, anything which can be said in one language can be said in another, that is, there exist a possibility of translating what has been expressed in one language into another language. The goal of the translator in this process is to keep the meaning constant whenever necessary; making sure that the receptor language form should be changed whenever appropriate, in order that the source language meaning should not be distorted since a meaning expressed by a particular form in another language often requires changing the form when translating.

## 2. FORM AND MEANING IN TRANSLATION



*J'ai sommeil*

*I am sleepy*

Text to be translated

Translation

- Discover the context of usage
- Derive the meaning

Re-expressed meaning

Meaning

Source language                    Receptor language

A very literal translation of the French into English would be *I have sleep*. But this would not be a good English translation. The appropriate English translation would be *I am sleepy*. The two languages use different grammatical forms and different lexical selections to signal the same meaning. It is true though that people who have a good mastery of both source language and receptor language can often make the transfer from one form to another very rapidly without thinking about the semantic structure overtly. However, for complicated texts, and when the translator may not be equally fluent in the two languages (if they are mother-tongue speakers of only one), understanding the procedure presented here will enable the realisation of more adequate translations using this semantic analysis perspective.

It is relatively easy to illustrate this by analysing the translation of simple sentences used in everyday conversation. For example, one easily learns such differences as the following:

French: *Comment tu t'appelles ?*
English : *What is your name ?*
Literally: *How you call yourself*

Here, it is not simply a matter of different word choices, but of different grammatical structures. We expect greetings to have varying forms. But notice the following additional examples of the forms used to express that a person, who is a speaker, possesses money:

French uses: *J'ai de l'argent*
English uses: *I have money*
Japanese literally: *To me there is money*
Arabic literally: *with me there is money*
Turkich literally: *my money exists*
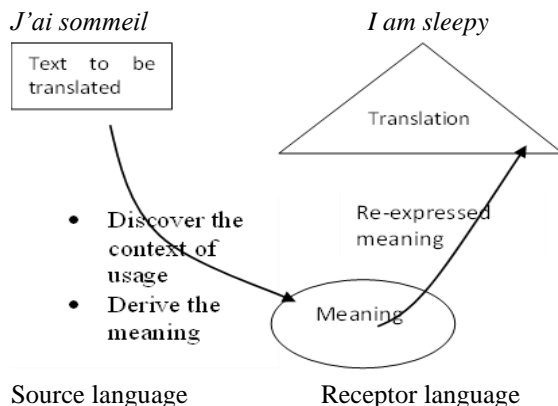
Translators will almost never have problems with these common expressions since they hardly think about the fact that the grammatical forms and the lexical choices are so different. But as they move into unfamiliar material, or higher levels of semantic structures with complicated sentences and discourses, there is a tendency for choices of lexical items and grammatical forms in the receptor language to be unduly influenced by the lexical items and grammatical forms of the source language. The result will be forms which sound strange and foreign to speakers of the receptor language. For example, a German speaker may say in English; *The child has*

*fever, it is ill* instead of the *child has fever,he/she is ill* due to the influence of German that states: *Das kind hat fieber, es ist krank*.

In English, there need to be an article *a* before fever and child is referred to by a masculine or feminine pronoun *he/she*, rather than the neutral pronoun *it*. *The child has a fever, s/he is ill.*

We are familiar with the mistakes non-native speakers of a language make. If analysed, these errors almost reflect the lexical and grammatical forms of the person's mother tongue. He has translated literally the form from his own language (the source language) and therefore, his speech in a receptor language is unnatural.

For example: an advertisement for tourist in Belem-Brazil reads:

*We glad to you are unforgettable trip by fantastic Marajo' Island* meaning we *offer you an unforgettable trip to fantastic Marajo Island;* in another place the paper states:

*...beyond all those things, enjoys of delicious that your proper mind can create. Marajo is inspiration.* This statement means… *and above all, enjoy the delights which your own mind will create. Marajo will inspire you.*

A look at the Portuguese on the other side of the advertisement shows that the unnatural English was the result of following the form of the Portuguese source language in writing the English receptor language translation.

To do effective translation, one must discover the meaning of the source language and use receptor language forms which express the meaning in a natural way.

The underlying premise that underpins the process of translation is that: a good translation is that which:

a) Portrays normal language forms of the receptor language.
b) Communicates as much as possible, to the receptor language user, the same meaning as that was understood by the user of the source language.
c) Maintains the dynamics of the original source language text. That is, the translation should evoke the same response as the source text attempted to evoke.

## 3. REVISITING LITERAL VERSUS IDIOMATIC TRANSLATION

Due to the fact that a given text has both form and meaning, as earlier mentioned, there are two main kinds of translation: one that attempts to follow the form of the source language and are known as literal translation and the other that seeks to restitute the original text meaning in the target text –known as meaning-based translation

Meaning-based translations make every effort to communicate the meaning of the source language text in the natural forms of the receptor language; such translations are called idiomatic translations.

An interlinear translation is a completely literal translation. For some purposes, it is desirable to reproduce the linguistic features of the source text in the case of a linguistic study of that language. Although these literal translations may be very useful for purposes related to the study of the source language, they are of little help to speakers of the receptor language text.

A literal translation sounds like nonsense and has little communication value as illustrated below:

French: *Comment tu t'appelles*
English: *How you call yourself*

This literal translation makes little sense in English; the appropriate translation would be *what your name is?*

If the two languages are related, the literal translation can often be understood, since the general grammatical form may be similar. However, the literal choice of lexical items makes the translation sound foreign.

Consider this Bilingual announcement once in Orly Airport-France:

Literal English: *Madame Odette, passenger with destination Douala, is demanded on the telephone.*

This English version is a literal translation of the French:

*Madame Odette, passager à destination de Douala, est demandée au tététphone.*

An idiomatic translation into English would be :

*Madam Odette, passenger for Douala, you are needed on the phone.*

Except for an interlinear translation, a truly literal translation is uncommon. Most translators who tend to translate literally actually make a partially modified literal translation. They modify the order and grammar

enough to use acceptable sentence structures in receptor language. Nevertheless, the lexical items are translated literally occasionally, these are also changed to avoid complete nonsense or to improve the communication. However, the result still does not sound natural.

*Il fut mon ami de longues dates*
- He was my friend for many years
- For many years, he was my friend
- He was my friend many years ago.

The modified literal translation changes the order into English structure though the sentence still does not communicate in clear English.

A person who translates in a modified literal manner will change the grammatical forms when the constructions are obligatory. However if he has a choice he will follow the forms of the source text even though a different form might be more natural in the receptor language.

Usually, literal translations of words, idioms figures of speech etc, result in unclear, unnatural, and sometimes nonsensical translations. In a modified literal translation good enough to avoid real nonsense and wrong meaning, there is still unnaturalness in terms of pragmatics.

On the other hand, idiomatic translations use the natural forms of the receptor language both in the grammatical construction. A truly idiomatic translation does not sound like a translation. It sounds like it was written originally in the receptor language. Therefore, a good translator will try to translate idiomatically. This is the goal but nonetheless, translations are often a mixture of a literal transfer of the grammatical units along with some idiomatic translation of the meaning of the text.

Worth of note is that, it is not easy to constantly translate idiomatically. A translator may express some parts of his translation in very natural forms and then in other parts fall back into literal forms. As elaborated by [1], a translation falls on a continuum from very literal to idiomatic; then may even envelop to unduly free.

Very literal,   literal,   modified literal, inconsistent mixture

near idiomatic,  idiomatic,  unduly free

*The continuum of* translation (Ardo *2011*)

Unduly free translation as well known by translators, are not considered acceptable translations for most purposes because they merely express remotely connected nuances that are not in direct link with the issues under consideration. They add extraneous information not in the source text that changes the meaning of the historical and cultural setting of the source language text. Sometimes unduly free translations are made for purpose of humour, or to bring about a special response from the receptor language speakers. However, they are not acceptable as normal translations because such translations emphasise on the meaning which is not necessarily that of the source language. Such translations are in resonance with translators' goal to reproduce in the receptor language a text which communicates the message as the source language but using the natural grammatical and lexical choices of the receptor language. This is what is looked upon as providing an idiomatic translation with the understanding that an idiomatic translation reproduces the meaning of the source language (that is, the meaning intended by the original communicator) in the natural form of the receptor language.

However, there is always the danger of interference from the form of the source language justifying [2]'s assertion that, in order to translate idiomatically, a translator will need to be conversant with both languages.

## 4. CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

Each language has its own division of lexicon into classes such as nouns verbs adjectives etc. different languages will have different classes and subclasses. It will not always be possible to translate a source language noun with a noun in the receptor language – the need to resort to traspositioning.

The pronominal systems vary greatly from language to language and the translator is obliged to use the forms of the receptor language even though they may have very different meanings than the pronouns of the source language. One may be expected to make a difference between singular and plural person even though the source language does not make this distinction. In English the first person plural pronoun *we* is often used when the real meaning is second

person *you*. The reason for the use of *we*, is to show empathy and understanding. A nurse says to the sick child it's *time for us to take our medicines …*, or a teacher says *"we are not going to shout, we will walk quietly to our seats"* clearly, the pronouns do not refer to the nurse or the teacher but to the children to whom they are addressing. In translating these pronouns into another language, a literal translation with first person plural would probably distort the meaning. The translator would need to look for the natural way to communicate second person and the feeling of empathy carried by the source language. Grammatical constructions also vary between the source language and the receptor.

4.1 Translation of Lexical Features

Each language has its own idiomatic way of expressing meaning through lexical items (words, phrases, etc) languages abound in idiom, secondary meaning, metaphor, and other figurative meaning.

All languages have idioms – string of words whose meaning is different than the meaning conveyed by the individual words. In English, to say that someone is bullhead means that the person is stubborn. The meaning has little to do with bull or head. Languages abound in such idioms.

For example:

- fly into passion,
- run into debt
- stumble into acquaintance,
- glide into intimacy

These combinations are fixed as to form and their meaning comes from the combination.

A literal word for word translation of these idioms into another language will not make sense.

Translators who want to make a good idiomatic translation often find figures of speech extremely challenging. A literal translation of *blind as a bat* might sound really strange in a language where the comparison between a blind man or person and a bat has never been used as a figure of speech since figures of speech are often based on stories or historical incidents and more often, the origin of the figure is no longer apparent.

In the southern part of the West Region of Cameroon, specifically in the Menoua Division, a pig is called « *le sous-préfet* » or « *Beau regard* ». This has got nothing to do with a *Divisional officer* or a *pleasant look* in a

literal translation of the French language. However, in acknowledging that translation is a complex process, it does not undermine the fact that a translator who is concerned with transferring the meaning, will find that the receptor language has a way in which the desired meaning can be expressed, even though it may be very different from the source language form. In the early days, men like Cicero and Horace stated that a faithful translator will not translate word-for-word from what has been said.

So far, we can admit that two things are necessary for a good translation: an adequate understanding of the original language (the source language) and an adequate command of the language into which one is translating (the receptor language).

But considering the complexity of language structures, how can a translator ever hope to produce an adequate translation? Literalisms can only be avoided by a careful analysis of the source language and by first of all understanding clearly the message to be communicated. A translator who takes the time to study carefully the source language text, to write a semantic analysis of it, and then to look for the equivalent way in which the same message is expressed naturally in the receptor language, will be able to provide an adequate, and sometimes brilliant translation. His goal must be to avoid literalism and to strive for a truly idiomatic receptor language text ensuring the receptor language reader does not recognise his work as a translation at all, but simply as a text written in the receptor language for their information and enjoyment.

4.2 Translation and the Semantic Structure of Language

Another way to look at form and meaning in translation is to think of them as surface structures and deep structures. One of the basic assumptions of this study is that, there is a valid distinction between the deep (semantic) and the surface (grammatical, lexical, phonological) structures of languages [3]. An analysis of the surface structure of a language does not tell us all that we need to know about it in order to translate. Behind the surface structure is the deep structure - the meaning. It is this meaning that serves as a base for translating into any language. A second basic assumption is that **meaning is structured;** it is not just an inaccessible mass [4]. It can be analysed and represented in ways that are useful to the translator and

it is not ordered in the way the surface structure must be ordered. Meaning is a network of semantic units and the relations between these units; these units and relations may be represented in various ways [5]

The conventions being examined here have been chosen for practical reasons being to agree with linguistic theory and to present tools which will help in translation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the procedure is based on the two assumptions given above.

Semantic structure is more nearly universal then grammatical structure. That is, types of units, as well as features and the relationships are essentially the same for all languages. All have meaning components that can be classified as *things, events, attributes* or *relations*, but not all languages have the same surface structure grammatical classes; some have conjunctions, others do not, some have prepositions phrases, others do not because word classes differ from language to language. The four semantic classes listed above occur in all languages thus, any concept occurring in any language will refer to a thing, event, attribute or relation making the process of translation a universal linguistic possibility.

## 5. THE COMMUNICATION SITUATION IN TRANSLATION.

It is desirable to make a distinction between those things in language over which the user can exercise choice and over which no choice is available to him. The former reflects meaning as many linguists have pointed out; meaning is possible only when a language user could choose to say something else instead. The latter are the more mechanical components of language, the implication process by which results of the speaker's choices are expressed in a conventional form that permits communication with someone else. The meaning which is chosen will be influenced by the communication situation, that is, by who the language user is, who the audience is, the traditions of the culture etc. the user (or writer) basing this choice on many factors in the *communication situation*, chooses what he wishes to communicate. Once he has determined the meaning, he is limited to using the forms *(grammatical lexical phonological)* of the language in which he wishes to make some part more prominent than another, or to add some focus to a part of a message.

Let us consider this situation: A mother who is angry with her son for not doing his part of the family chores, may desire to tell him to empty the garbage. She has told him to do it before, so he knows it is his duty. She will want to convey all of this meaning. The command to empty the garbage and the emotion she feels about it. To do so, she might not use a surface structure command form, but rather a question. For instance, a *when question*: *when are you going to empty the garbage?* If he had never been asked to do it before, and if she were not angry or exasperated, she would have probably used a command form such as: *please empty the garbage for me.*

Here, because of the *emotive meaning* being communicated, we have a skewing of form and meaning in that a question form signals a command. Many languages do not use questions in this way, so a different form will be used in translating such a statement. Notwithstanding, which-ever form is chosen, it should communicate both the information and the emotion of the source language.

Before the form is chosen from the possibilities in the surface structure, socio-linguistics and psycholinguistics matters that affect meaning must be taken into account; and the speakers, purpose, which in this case is not just to command but to show frustration and insistence, must be included.

Essentially, every translator desires to be faithful to the original. To do this, s/he must also attempt to evoke the same emotional response as the original text. For the translation to have the same dynamics as the original, it will need to be natural and easy to understand so that the readers will find it easy to grasp the message, including both the information and the emotional effects intended by the source language author.

Each source language text is written in a specific historical setting, in a specific cultural setting, and with a purpose; that is, the intent of the author [6]. These matters must also be taken into consideration if a faithful translation is to result. When ancient manuscripts are being translated into today's languages, there may be tension between trying to be faithful to the historical material and *modernise* the translation to be less faithful. When a source language text is from a culture very different from the culture in which the receptor language is spoken, it is always difficult to translate in such a way that the result will

communicate the same message since communication situation and the culture affect translation.

Should we agree that translation is communicating the meaning in the receptor language as it was communicated in the source language, then we must also note that, to do it adequately, requires being aware of the fact that there are various kinds of meaning. Not all of the meaning which is being communicated is stated overtly in the forms of the source text. Discovering the meaning of the text to be translated includes consideration of both explicit and implicit information.

People usually think of meaning as something that a word or sentence refer to. For example, the word *orange* refers to a fruit produced by a certain tree. People know the meaning of *orange* because they have seen an *orange* and the learned to call it orange. This kind of meaning is called *referential meaning* because the word refers to a certain *thing, event, attribution,* or *relation* which a person can perceive or imagine. A sentence has meaning because it refers to something that happened or may happen, or is imagined as happening.

Referential meaning is what communication is about. It is information content and is organised into semantic structure. The information bits are *packaged*; that is, they are put together and expressed by a variety of combinations. As they are packaged into longer and larger units, there is *organisational meaning* in the discourse which must also be taken into consideration in the translation. For example, if *orange* has been referred to in the text and then *orange* is referred to again, the fact that it is the same orange is part of the organisational meaning of the text. Certain information may be old information, some new; certain information may be the topic (what is being talked about) of the discourse; other information may be commenting on the topic; and some information may be more central to the message; that is more important. It is the organizational meaning that puts the referential information together into a certain text. Organisational meaning is signalled by grouping, repetitions and many other features in the grammatical structure of the text.

Before the referential meaning and the organizational meaning is the situational meaning which is very crucial to the understanding of the text. The message is produced in a given communicative situation. The relationship between the writer or speaker and the addressee will affect the communication. Where the communication takes place, when it takes place, the age, sex and social status of the speakers and listeners, the relationship between them and prepositions that each bring to the communication, cultural background of the speaker and the addressee ; and many other situational matters result in situational meaning.

For instance, the very person may be referred to by various lexical items depending on the situation. *Peter, the teacher, Monsieur,* etc; or, *Rosine, the girl, my love, darling, sweet heart* … depending on the situation as when one is angry, one says *devil, jezebel,* etc

A text may be completely unintelligible to someone who does not know the culture in which the language is spoken because there is so much situational meaning. When translating into another language, the original situational meaning may need to be included in a more overt form if the same total meaning is to be communicated to the reader; that is, both the referential and the situation meaning should be explicated.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The centrality of form and meaning in transcultural communication is an entangled web requiring a meticulous structural analysis to unravel the unobvious linkages embedded in the form and meaning bond. We did explain what translation is, the kinds of translations and some of the aspects of the relationship between grammar and semantics that affect the translation process. But most importantly, the article demonstrates that, only effective translation harbours the power to bring a world of diverged concepts of life like ours to acting together, looking together in the same direction and bridging cultural differences in this present era of globalization. The more translation enables us to communicate effectively from different cultural backgrounds, the more we leverage the differences embedded in concepts and values that influence each linguistic community in a number of important ways.

## REFERENCE

[1] Ardo, Z, (2011), emotions, taboos and profane language in translation in Translation Journal (2) 16-18

[2] Stephen kosslyn (2013) Cognitive and social learning Pearson education company USA

[3]Lisam, J.Cohen(2016),The handy psychology answer book, visible ink, Press Canton

[4] Speaks, Jeff, "Theories of Meaning", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

[5] Wilson, Deirdre and Dan Sperber, (2012), *Meaning and Relevance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Rothschild, Daniel and Seth Yalcin, (2016), Three *Notions of Dynamics's in Language*