

Advertisement Discourse and Linguistic Untranslatability

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Abstract :

The purpose of this talk is to discuss the difficulties characterising the translation of specific and relevant linguistic items in advertisements. The talk will use as theoretical background J.C. Catford's discussion of the notion of linguistic untranslatability and is divided into three parts. In the first part I shall focus on some problems of definition that characterize such items as discourse, text, and context, and analyse the specificities of the advertisement discourse. The second part will concentrate on the discussion of the notion of linguistic untranslatability and point out some of the cases where this issue may prove of an utmost importance. In the third part, I shall analyse the discourse of precise advertisement examples and show to what extent linguistic untranslatability affects the transfer of advertisements.

Introduction:

In their analysis of advertisements and their transfer process from a SL into a TL, scholars have been often concerned with the cultural aspects and the difficulties they may give rise to. In her "A Discursive-Semiotic Approach to Translating Cultural Aspects in Persuasive Advertisements," for example, Ilze Bezuidenhout argues, that "the task of discourse analysis is to identify the cultural aspects and determine their role in the persuasive advertisements in view of transferring

them in the translation process.” Bezuidenhout’s concern is the result of her belief that advertisements are culturally loaded, that is they are often determined by the cultural environment in which they are created and present specific cultural elements that are designed to promote new products and attract would-be consumers. In other words the cultural specificities of the source language text play an important role in the financial success of an advertising campaign. Since what matters most in the case of advertisements is the economic profitability, it is indeed highly important for the advertisement translator to pay close attention to the cultural aspects that are at the core of the SL advertisement and their transfer in the TL. However, it seems to me that the heavy concern with cultural aspects at the expense of linguistic elements during the transfer process of advertisements may prove a limited conception of the task of discourse analysis and a serious source of difficulty for the advertisement translator. Linguistic features are as crucial as cultural aspects and like the latter they must be given due attention. In her article “Text World Creation in Advertising Discourse,” for example, one of the tasks that Laura Hidalgo Downing sets for herself is to explore “the ways in which text worlds are created in advertising discourse by analysing *linguistic choices* and features of context...” This is because, as she also argues, linguistic choices “made in discourse at the different linguistic levels (lexis, morphology, syntax, phonology) are significant and determine the creation of different meanings.” Laura Hidalgo Downing further suggests that “an important implication of the fact that linguistic choice gives rise to different meanings is that linguistic choice also determines different interpretations of reality, or yields different world views.” (world views typically reproduce ideologies). In addition, referring to Cook and Campos Pardillos she writes that one of the main concerns in their discussion of advertising discourse is “the description of some typical linguistic textual devices which are exploited by advertising discourse to pursue a communicative purpose.” Some linguistic aspects (choices) in advertisement discourse may turn out to be key-words or functionally relevant features;

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consequently the difficulty arising here is that the translator cannot render these items by simply substituting them by equivalent items in the target language. The difficulty is especially evident when it comes to those advertisements that make use of puns. Since the latter are indeed an example *par excellence* that is at the origin of what J.C. Catford calls linguistic untranslatability many advertisements that are constructed in a pun-like manner prove “*linguistically untranslatable*”. This is, as I have already mentioned, the purpose of my paper.

Discourse – Text - Context

The analysis of Advertisement discourse often shows a close concern with such key-words as discourse, text, and context. When dealing with this topic many scholars introduce their discussion by concentrating on some problems of definition involving the items discourse, text, and context, and analyse at great length the relationship between them. Given the purpose of this talk it is worth giving a brief idea about these crucial items, especially as discussed in some papers on the analysis of advertisement discourse.

The controversy over the terms text and discourse is illustrated, for example, by Stubbs “who differentiates between text and discourse”. As he puts it “one talks of written text versus spoken discourse”. However, as Ilze bezuidenhout also suggests, “Often theorists use text and discourse interchangeably; (while) others define discourse as spoken words only, and texts as written words.” Moreover, in his definition of the two items Newmark seems to suggest yet another definition since, as he states, “discourse is an all-inclusive term for the written and spoken language used in a social act.”

As for context it refers to the situation or the background in which a given occurrence is produced. In her discussion of this item, Laura Hidalgo Downing argues that

Duranti and Goodwin define context as “a frame that surrounds the event being examined”. She also suggests that a feature of context is that it is “ever-changing and dynamic, so that what may be the focal event at one point in one situation may become part of background in a different situation.”. Finally, in her attempt to define the specific contextual features, she argues “ a standard definition of context includes the following information : *the immediate situational context* (comprising) the physical context, the knowledge brought in by the participants in the interaction , the language itself, and *the socio-cultural context.*” Downing concludes by suggesting that “these features are always present in the creation of situations in advertisements, similarly to what happens in other discourse types, and they are exploited for specific purposes.”

Text , context, and discourse are closely related items and the dependence on one another is quite evident. For example, “the *text* takes place within a given situation or *context*,” while “*context* and *text* are two inseparable aspects that work together to constitute *the discourse.*” (emphases mine)

Specificities of Advertisement Course

As has been suggested, because of its very nature and specific features advertisement discourse “challenges the translator more than any other discourse”. Hence, it is worth considering though briefly some of the specificities of advertisement discourse and analyse the translator’s handling of them. First, in her interesting article, “Text World Creation in Advertising Discourse”, Laura Hidalgo Downing also compares the advertisement discourse and literary discourse. She writes , for example, “some authors have observed the similarities between certain types of advertising and literary writing, in that both discourse types create fictional worlds in order to pursue a communicative purpose.” However, she also argues that many theorists point out major differences between these two types of

discourse. When dealing with Cook's discussion of this issue, she states,

“According to Cook (1993: 194), one of the crucial differences between literary discourse and advertising discourse is that while literary discourse typically performs the function that Cook defines as the function of *cognitive change*, that is, the modification or challenging of the reader's world schemata leading to a reevaluation of concepts, advertising discourse tends to be conservative, in the sense that it reinforces already existing and accepted world schemata, thus reinforcing the feeling of identity of a given social group.”

Other characteristic elements of advertisement discourse that are often pointed out relate to features of context, function, and discursive strategies. We have seen earlier a standard definition of context and the information it includes. As applied to advertisement discourse the notion of context, as suggested by some scholars, consists of the following items: *substance, music and pictures, paralanguage, situation, co-text, inter-text, participants, function.*” As has been argued not all of these elements always appear at once in a given situation. Reference to the function of advertisement is noteworthy for through the discourse analysis it has been shown that in addition to its predominant function that is “the persuasive function, which urges people to buy a product” advertising has other crucial “functions such as amusing, informing, pleading, warning, etc.” Finally a close analysis of the textual – discursive strategies of advertisement also reveals that “Like other discourse types which make a creative use of language, such as fictional writing, poetry, joke telling and humour, advertising discourse “indulges in code””. This is certainly an important aspect which will be widely discussed in my analysis of some of advertisements.

Linguistic untranslatability

At the origin of the notion of linguistic untranslatability which may prove a serious challenge for the advertisement translator is J.C. Catford. In his discussion of "the limits of translatability", J.C. Catford argues that "translation fails – or untranslatability occurs- when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into the contextual meaning of the T.L. text." Catford divides the cases in which untranslatability occurs into two categories which he calls, *cultural untranslatability and linguistic untranslatability*. As he suggests, in linguistic untranslatability, which is the subject of our discussion, "the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the *language* of the SL text. If the TL has no formally corresponding feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable." This type of untranslatability occurs mainly when the SL reveals an ambiguity that is a functionally relevant feature (that is a certain effect is sought with the use of such an ambiguity). This is the case of puns.

In addition, Catford argues that these ambiguities (at the origin of untranslatability) are the result of (i) *shared exponence* and (ii) *polysemy*. And in his definition of the two notions he writes, "By *shared exponence* we mean those cases where two or more distinct grammatical or lexical items are expounded in one and the same phonological or graphological form." As for *polysemy* Catford suggests, "The second type of linguistic ambiguity is due to what would usually be called *polysemy*; that is, not to the fact that two or more items have the same exponent, but that one single item has more than one meaning."

Catford's definition and discussion of the notion linguistic untranslatability is certainly interesting and is extremely useful for our analysis of advertisement discourse and its translation into a TL. It is worth mentioning that by elaborating on Catford's notion of linguistic untranslatability, many theorists and scholars

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have come to focus on some specific linguistic phenomena that lead to an impossibility of translation on various levels, especially on phonetic level, on morpheme level, on vocabulary level, and on the level of rhetoric. This is particularly true as they have pointed out, in the case of the transfer of advertisements.

Analysis of Advertisements

In the following part I shall concentrate on the analysis of a few advertisement examples and discuss cases of linguistic untranslatability as well as their impact on the translation process. (The examples discussed are in French and it is highly likely that their transfer into English causes some difficulties).

The first advert reads:

Hextril vous enlève les mots/maux de la bouche

This is a T.V. advert. It features a character (a man) who is suffering from mouth ulcer (or tooth aches) and is led to take or use a medicine consisting of a "mouth wash", in this case Hextril. Having done this the man feels great relief as the pain he suffered from disappears on the spot; the effect of Hextril is not only immediate but also magic. This is mainly reflected in the reaction of this character or *paralanguage*, which is an important feature of context in advertisement discourse. By paralanguage is meant the "meaningful behaviour accompanying language, such as voice quality, gestures, facial expressions and touch (in speech) and choice of type face and letter sizes in (writing)." Hence the man in the advert is so overwhelmed with the result of his applying Hextril that he loses his voice. He remains speechless and cannot express his feeling of contentment.

Consequently, in addition to promoting this medicine the slogan of the advert reaches a double effect (purpose) that is reflected in the situation described (shown). First, the character is

happy with the fact that the pain disappears immediately, hence “Hextril vous enlève les *maux* de la bouche”. And since he is so relieved that he cannot express his happiness and remains speechless, we get “Hextril vous enlève les *mots* de la bouche”.

This is of course rendered possible through a play on the words “mots” and “maux” that are a source of ambiguity. It is also the kind of ambiguity that characterizes the use of puns and which is heightened by the fact that the slogan is given in a spoken form rather than a written one (impossibility of determining the meaning through its spelling (or the graphological form) of the “functionally relevant feature.” In addition, the ambiguity characterizing this advert is due to what J.C. Catford calls “*shared exponence*” (i.e.: “those cases where two or more distinct grammatical or lexical items are expounded in one and the same phonological or graphological form”). Likewise this advert is a case of what is referred to as “*linguistic untranslatability on the phonetic level*” that is “it is the pronunciation, a peculiar thing of all kinds of languages that is made use of ingeniously, so that sentences constituted of homophony are untranslatable.”

Indeed an attempt at transferring the slogan of the Hextril advert from French into English will result in a loss of meaning (or effect). For example, its rendering as “Hextril leaves you speechless” is inadequate because it leaves out the second meaning of the slogan (Hextril vous enlève les *maux*) and the effect sought through the play on words. Because of the ambiguity characterising the items “maux” and “mots” which are in the words of Catford “the functionally relevant features” and which have no equivalents in the TL, the (double) effect/meaning conveyed by the slogan cannot be rendered. Hence, as has been suggested, “readers can only understand its trick and appreciate its subtlety through the source text. Since there are words pronounced alike yet with different forms and meanings, we can’t find appropriate equivalent homophones in the target

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language. If we force ourselves to translate it, the original flavour will be lost.”

The following are two other advertisement examples in French which may prove untranslatable into English because “the original flavour will be lost.” One of them praises the merits of a salmon produce called “Cru” while the other advertises a type of spectacles cleaning paper called “Vu”. They read:

**A) Cru se mange aussi bien cru que cuit qui
l'eût cru**

B) Vu, je ne l'avais pas vu. Qui a Vu verra.

As is the case with the previous advert these two examples present a pun-like structure with a play on the verbs « croire », “voir” and the adjective “cru”. Example (A) is based on an ambiguity that is due to “*shared exponence*”. Likewise these examples illustrate cases of linguistic untranslatability on the phonetic level that cannot be rendered in the TL. What characterizes these two adverts is also the fact that they may prove cases of what is referred to as “untranslatability of rhetoric”. By rhetoric is meant here, “the fundamental technique of modifying words, the form arrangement of producing aesthetic feeling, and the strategy by which information is transmitted.” Hence “when some sentences with special rhetoric devices are translated into other languages, it’s rather difficult to preserve the original effects and aesthetic sense.” Indeed the adverts discussed here, in addition to illustrating cases of linguistic untranslatability on the phonetic level because of the play on words, also present an aesthetic effect through the use of alliteration and a specific rhythm that is almost impossible to render into English.

The last advert I will discuss here relates to the Algerian private company **Cévital**. It runs as follows, “**Cévital, la qualité c’est vital.**” As stated in French the advert conveys a double effect.

First, it states a crucial truth for the consumer but which can be also perceived as an evidence, i.e.: quality is (a) vital (thing). Second, through a rhetorical strategy, mainly a play on words that finds full effect on the phonetic level, the name (label) of the company is associated with the importance of quality. Indeed, as is reflected in the advert quality emerges exclusively Cevital's business (suggesting perhaps that other companies do not pay attention to this aspect). Hence, the translation of this advert into English by "Cévital, quality is vital," is inadequate because it conveys only aspect (the first one) of the advert at the expense of the second one that equates Cevital with quality, and which is perhaps the most important. At any rate the double effect (and rhetoric) reflected in this advert is lost because of a linguistic untranslatability.

Works Consulted

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