
A Sociolinguistic Exploration of Sociolects in Translation

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ABSTRACT: *Translation is not a mere transfer of words; it is a process that intersects with many other disciplines such as sociolinguistics whose object of study is the relationship between language use and society. Since sociolects are language variations of particular social groups, the present paper attempts to answer the question of how sociolects are translated when the source and target languages are completely different, which can prove to be quite problematic for translators. It argues that sociolects may not be properly translated without adopting a sociolinguistic approach to achieve cross-cultural communication. The study aims to provide further insights into the way English sociolects are translated taking into account several variables as well as paralinguistic and extralinguistic features. The framework within which this study is conducted is sociolinguistic theory of translation which will be applied to some sociolects.*

KEYWORDS: culture, linguistics, sociolects, sociolinguistics, translation,

RÉSUMÉ : *La traduction n'est pas un simple transfert de mots; c'est un processus qui se croise avec de nombreuses autres disciplines comme la sociolinguistique dont l'objet d'étude est la relation entre l'usage des langues et la société. Étant donné que les sociolectes sont des variations linguistiques de groupes sociaux particuliers, le présent article tente de répondre à la question de savoir comment les sociolectes sont traduits lorsque les langues source et cible sont complètement différentes, ce qui peut s'avérer assez problématique pour les traducteurs. L'étude soutient que les sociolectes peuvent ne pas être correctement traduits sans adopter une approche sociolinguistique pour assurer une communication interculturelle. L'étude vise à fournir des informations supplémentaires sur la façon dont les sociolectes anglais sont traduits en tenant compte de plusieurs variables ainsi que des caractéristiques paralinguistiques et*

extralinguistiques. Le cadre dans lequel cette étude est menée est la théorie sociolinguistique de la traduction qui sera appliquée à certains sociolectes anglais.

MOTS-CLÉS : culture, linguistique, sociolecte, sociolinguistiques, traduction

Introduction

Language is not just a means of communication; it can be a medium to identify social groups as well as cultural and historical backgrounds of a given community. Social language varieties have gained great interest among sociologists and linguists around the world. Since sociolects are language varieties, they fall under the scope of sociolinguistics, more precisely sociolectology which intersects with sociology. Several sociolectal studies have been conducted on non-standard linguistic forms, sociolects, jargon, general argot and slang in various languages. For the purpose of our study, we will use the term sociolect instead of social dialect; the reasons of this choice are explained below.

Definition of sociolects:

Most often the terms “sociolect” and “social dialect” are used interchangeably but according to John Platt, it is better to use the concept of dialect when dealing with regional variations. (Platt 1978, 28) This clearly means that there is a distinction between sociolect and dialect. Thus, before defining the term sociolect, we should first define the concept of dialect.

Dialect is defined as “a variety of language that differs from others along three dimensions: vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation” (Edwards 2009, 63), dialects are language forms that are particularly associated with geographical areas (Haywood Thompson & Hervey 2013) From these two definitions, it is inferred that dialect has its own features and is closely related to geographical locations and regional characteristics. It is a special pattern of communicating and using a language, and is spoken by a group of people in the same region. In Algeria, for example, there are several dialects such as Berber, Chaoui, Tergui, Djidjelli, Thumzabt and Thashelhit.

On the other hand, sociolect is etymologically composed of the morphemes "socio" from social and “lect” which means language variety, Trudgill defined sociolect as “a variety or lect which is thought of as being

related to its speakers' social background rather geographical background" (Trudgill 2003, 122), this clearly means that sociolect is the language spoken by a particular social group sharing the same features. Hence, sociolects are defined on a social basis rather than a regional one.

They are related to the social dimension as well as sociological notions of stratifications. For instance, the terms "urban working class", "white collar", "public school" are common sociolects in the United Kingdom. (Honko 1998, 69)

Sociolects are not just related to phonology, grammar and vocabulary but they are "the repository of society's myths and are represented by themes, commonplace phrases and descriptive systems (stereotyped networks of metonyms around any given lexical nucleus)" (Honko 1998, 69), that is to say, sociolects are deeply integrated into the speech community and help determine social and educational backgrounds, gender, age, class and profession.

Another concept which is opposed to sociolect is "idiolect" which is "the linguistic idiom of an individual, his/her linguistic 'fingerprints'" (Roger 1995, 39). Thus, the distinction between sociolect and idiolect is that the first is associated with a social group's use of language, whereas the other reflects a particular use.

To summarize, sociolects are language varieties that determine social classes, genders, socio-economic status, age and other social features. Each social group has its own sociolects that are different from another's.

Characteristics of sociolects

Sociolects are characterized by several features since they are language varieties; they are primarily social, can also be defined in terms of geographical factors and can represent a variety within a regional dialect itself (Schatz 1986, 240), this means that sociolects cannot be separated from dialects; they are overlapping speech varieties, interacting with one another. They include age, gender, social class, education, socio-economic circumstances and ethnicity and can define an individual identity.

People of the same social class usually share similar features such as education level, income rate, profession profile. People of the same gender may have the same interests and language forms. Trudgill pointed out that there are differences between the female and male speech. (Trudgill 1974, 84)

Moreover, “sociolects are properties of the language users rather than the uses to which language is put” (Roger 1995, 39) since they are a distinctive language shared by a social group which makes them limited perspectives whose interpretation and understanding can be both easy and difficult. For instance, the language of an unemployed young man is different from that of a doctor. Social class, educational level and socioeconomic status can be easily reflected by sociolects because they act as identity markers. For instance, the terms “pathology” and “sever” are medical sociolects relating to the profession of medicine.

Therefore, it is difficult to find sociolects devoid of specialized terminology.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that certain professions are prestigious than others such as medicine, aviation and engineering, their specific vocabulary is called jargon which is a special technical vocabulary related to a particular profession.

Furthermore, sociolects variations can be seen at the level of structure, vocabulary and pronunciation. However, “grammatical variables mark social stratification more sharply” (Chambers 1995, 51) like verbal morphology, deletion of “ne” in French negative sentences, variation in the use of the pronouns “nous”/ “on”, “tu/vous” use of inflected and periphrastic forms to mark futurity and modality.

“Sociolects are broad enough to develop various functional styles, including an “official-business style”, a “journalistic”, a “scientific” and a “literature style”, in addition to a style of spoken language” (Bustanov & Kemper 2013, 263) This means that the user of sociolects can switch from one style to another according to different contexts.

Typology of sociolects

Grabias (1994, 127) elaborated a typology of Polish social dialects which can be generalised to other languages such as English and Arabic, on the basis of three parameters: professionalism, secrecy and expressiveness. (as cited in Lewandowski 2010, 62) As for the first one, it relates to the word codes shared by a group of professionals such as lawyers and pilots. The second is associated with the ability to restrict information to a particular group. The third parameter includes the devices likely to express attitudes to extra-linguistic reality.

We believe that these three variables are particularly interesting since they highlight the subdivisions of sociolects suggested by Grabias, namely, occupational sociolects which are characterized by a professional language whose function is mainly referential and is not coded unlike jargon. Since some sociolects are derived from various professional fields, they are also called “technolects” which mainly comprise specialized terminology, including abbreviations and acronyms.

Expressive sociolects whose function is expressive such as slangs are informal uses of language with negative connotations sometimes that change constantly and are often associated with specific social group. We should mention that colloquialism which is an informal language style and vernacular which is linked to social groups can be used to refer to slang and they have positive connotations.

Other types of sociolects may include religious sociolects which are closely related to religion with specific phraseology and orthography. Den Heijer (2012) considered religious sociolects as registers similar to medical and philosophical texts. (as cited in Kahn 2018, 193)

Political sociolects can be considered as a “socio-cultural version of socio-political speech” (Sheigal 2004, 237). We should note that doublespeak characterizes the language of politics which can be seemingly intended to be truth-bearing while it is deceiving in its core. Speakers can use metaphorical models to express political sociolects such as personifying metaphors to depict some realities based on ideological orientations.

Quotations, allusions, and other references to specific pre-existing texts can be a distinguishing feature of political sociolects. (Baygarina 2013, 131)

Translation of sociolects

The translation of sociolects may be quite problematic and yet interesting because they relate to various social categories which are different in many dimensions. Looking up in the dictionary for sociolects is not an appropriate way to translate them. Intercultural competence is required to render them properly. Notions of sociolects should be preserved in translation. Translators will not replace words by others only but they have to get to know the concepts and various uses of terms, in this regard, equivalence is not enough to render sociolects because "Understanding across languages does not depend on structural equivalences but on

common conceptual systems, born from the larger context of our experience" (Kramsch 2000, 13).

It is worth mentioning that sometimes social dialects are not considered as part of the standard language, "as a social norm, then, a dialect is a language that is excluded from polite society. It is often equivalent to nonstandard or even substandard" (Wardhaugh 1986, 28), this is why dialects and sociolects are usually rendered in a standard language which leads to the loss of intercultural varieties.

Sociolects should always be taken into consideration in the translation process since their "features can nevertheless convey important speaker-related information. If they are salient features of the ST, the translator cannot ignore them when deciding on a strategy" (De Sándor, Hervey & Higgins 2002, 165). In other words, sociolects functions should be clearly identified from the very beginning.

Translators have to look for those functions in the source language first, once they are identified, they can decide on the appropriate strategy to be used. "In translating an eyewitness account of a crime for Interpol, sociolect would probably be subordinated to getting the facts clear. But if sociolect is not incidental, the translation may need to find a way of solving this in the TT, this is sometimes, the case with journalistic texts and often with literary texts". (De Sándor, Hervey & Higgins 2002, 165)

It is clear that the function of sociolects is crucial in the decision-taking process as to whether the translator should look for an equivalent in the target text or change the type of the ST sociolect to ensure adequacy.

A problem in the translation of sociolects may arise from the fact that translators have little grasp of the target text variety, therefore, they should have the skill of pastiche. (De Sándor, Hervey & Higgins 2002, 167)

Generally speaking, there are two approaches to translate sociolects, the first one is using a target language dialect with similar denotative and connotative meanings, although this may lead to unwanted associations. (Hatim & Mason 1990) Therefore, the translation will not be smooth and will not sound natural. The second one is translating a sociolect in a standard language (De Sándor, Hervey & Higgins 2002, 165) which would be safer.

Gambier's (2010) believed that choosing the standard language to translate dialects and sociolects ensures readability although it makes these variations disappear.

We consider that replacing a sociolect with a standard language equivalent is an under-translation that modifies the original message. Moreover, sociolects impact speech behaviour and style. For instance, “the speech of a pipe-fitter who speaks in a formal way, may resemble the speech of a salesman who speaks a casual way”. (Haywood, Thompson & Hervey 2009, 177) Since sociolects highlight speech differences, translators have to reproduce those different features and preserve their naturalness.

On the other hand, Mevel (2007) supported the use of the “dialect-to-dialect” strategy through translating a sociolect with an equivalent in the TL or creating a new sociolect with the same function. (as cited in Pérez González 2014, 132) This strategy requires that the translator analyses thoroughly the ways language is used in the ST and how the relations of power and status are represented, then chooses the appropriate TL equivalent to render both language and cultural variations since they are interlinked.

Nevertheless, this task is not as easy as it may seem because sometimes there is no equivalent in the TL especially that sociolects have specific pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

Sociolects can be studied within the framework of sociolinguistic theory of translation perspective, one of the landmarks on which Nida’s equivalence approach was based. This theory considers translation as a communication act, the receptor plays an important role in decoding the translated message.

Nida believed that the translator should have the same purposes as the original author or compatible with those in the original message to ensure effect equivalence. (Nida 1964, 157) In this approach, the receptor is at the centre of the translation process. In his regard, if a first translation addressed to a specific audience and another is done for a different audience, no major differences exist between both translations.

We notice that an orientation towards receptors is a form of a changeable adapted translation. Hence, the translation process becomes tedious with changing properties because it does not follow a systematic pattern.

In this regard, we believe that the receptor is only one parameter among many others that should be taken into account when translating sociolects. Since this theory is receptor -oriented, the question that may rise is how would a translator translate a drug user slang, for instance, for a teenage girl, policeman, addiction specialist in different contexts? Should he/she

reproduce the original utterance in all relevant aspects for all receptors or should he/she adhere to the receptors' perspective? It is clear that the translator decision is central to the translation process and the translation would be done according to his/her viewpoint.

To conclude this section, translators can choose whether to translate sociolects with standard language, TL sociolects or create new ones. A mix of strategies can be used according to sociolects' purposes and functions as well as the translators' views. Shift in perspectives is not to be excluded, language performance and competence should be both taken into account by the translator.

Discussion and analysis

Having considered some approaches of sociolects translation, we believe that the sociolinguistic theory of translation is the most comprehensive one since it takes into account some social aspects of communication that should not be neglected in translation. For this reason, the following analysis will be conducted, largely, but not exclusively within this framework.

In order to identify the strategies applied to the translation of sociolects, we will conduct a comparative analytical study between SL sociolects and TL sociolects extracted from some textual materials.

- Sample 1: the casual terms of address “bud/buddy” which mean “a close friend” are sociolects generally used among youth and do not necessarily imply a deep friendship or intimacy. They are often subtitled with “يا صاح” in some movies. The Arabic term means “my friend” which can be considered as a short form of “صاحبي”. The Arabic sociolect renders both the meaning and form of the English sociolect “my bud”. Moreover, in Algerian dialect, the term “شريكى”, (literally my partner) is used as an address term among young people and does not refer to real partnership. The term “يا خو” is also widely used in the capital Algiers without necessarily implying real intimacy or closeness assumed by the speaker.
- Sample 2: the sociolects “black”, “negro”, “jigaboo”, “spade”, “coon” and even the term “dark-skinned” which is a euphemism for these offensive terms that are used by different social groups are often translated into Arabic with the term “أسود” or “زنجي”. However, these Arabic terms do not render all the negative connotations associated

with the English sociolects because these two terms are not really processed as slurs in Arabic; they rather have neutral connotations. Borrowing is often used in colloquial Arabic to refer to people of colour.

- Sample 3: the terms “out of wedlock child”, “bastard child”, “by-blow”, “illegitimate child”, “fruit of adultery” are sociolects describing a child who is born of parents who were not married at the time of birth. The euphemistic or neutral sociolect are usually used by educated people, whereas, the dysphemistic ones are used by uneducated or fanatic people. Most of the time, they are literally translated into Arabic, according to the contexts in which they occur as follows: “ابن”, “طفل غير شرعي”, “ابن زنا”, “طفل مولود خارج إطار الزواج” “حرام”.

From the point of view of Arabic, the expression “fruit of adultery” may not be translated literally since “fruit” usually refers to something positive. According to the Islamic religion as well as Arab society norms and traditions, adultery is forbidden and socially condemnable. Hence, the term “fruit” is not acceptable in the context of adultery which is a great sin. On the other hand, “fruit of marriage” can be used and translated as “ثمرة الزواج” which is perfectly acceptable and sounds natural and logical.

- Sample 4: the term “hypochondriac” which refers to a person who is exaggeratedly and unnecessarily worried about their health, is used among doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists and can be considered as a specialized term. Laypersons may simply use sickness to refer to this mental state. As for the translation into Arabic, we found the terms “اضطراب قلق المرض” and “التوهم المرضي” which are verbose compared to the English term. The translation strategy used to render the English medical sociolect is self-explanatory translation which can be lengthy in some contexts.
- Sample 5: the medical sociolect “pre-malignancy” is widely used in the medical context when interpreting analysis or check-up results. It means that the cancer cells have already begun to form and attack the body. The layperson may think that the cells function normally. This term is usually used to mitigate the shock of the patient and his family when they find out about the truth of the illness. It is translated “المرحلة

”السابقة للخبائة”. The strategies used in this translation are addition and self-explanatory translation which are lengthy and relatively ambiguous.

- Sample 6: the word “Gonnella” is a sociolect referring to cancer. It is also a slang for cancer; when someone has Gonnella, they have cancer. “big C” also refers to cancer. As for the medical treatment for cancer which involves surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, it is usually referred to as “slash and burn”. These sociolects are difficult to understand; the translator should be familiar with their meaning and use before attempting to transfer them from English into Arabic. They are often rendered as “السرطان” and “المرض الخبيث”. In Algerian dialect, the sociolect “هذاك المرض” is used to talk about all types of cancer. People usually avoid to mention them because they think it is a bad omen to do so.
- Sample 7: the word “pig” is a sociolect widely used among teenagers to refer to a fat person as a form of bullying and harassment. The words "over-weight "and" out-size "are also used by upper-class people in certain contexts; they are more polite and less offensive than the word “pig”. It is colloquially translated as “دب” in some Arab dialects since the pig is associated with other bad qualities such as dirtiness.
- Sample 8: the words “juice” or “sauce” may mean “alcohol” when used as sociolects among a group of teenagers or delinquents. If they are translated literally as “مرق” and “عصير”, they will be understood as such because these two sociolects are widely used in the United States and United Kingdom and not really common in Arabic. The translator should look for nicknames for alcohol that are used as sociolects.
- Sample 9: the sociolect “بايرة” in Algerian dialect refers to a woman who is not married and older than the age range during which woman is expected to marry. It is referred to in Arabic as “عانس”. It is offensive and often associated with negative connotations. This sociolect is translated into English as “spinster” which expresses the same meaning. However, this is an under-translation because the term does not convey all the negative connotations of the Algerian sociolect, for it is relatively neutral compared to the Arabic one. The following English slangs can render the meaning of the Algerian sociolect:

“mantrap”, “spintart” and “gettica” which are used to describe an unmarried woman and can be slurs.

- Sample 10: the Australian sociolect “bludger” and the British sociolects “bum” and “dossers” are used to refer to a lazy and lousy person. They are often translated as “كسول” in Arabic. However, the translation does not convey all the connotations of the above sociolects, because it is neutral and pertains to the standard language.

Conclusion

Sociolects are part and parcel of our everyday life; they determine the social class, background, age, gender and occupation of the speaker to the extent that they become identity markers. They often highlight social differences, assert subjective truth and potentially perpetuate stereotypes, clichés and prejudices around race, gender, religion and social class. The translation of sociolects is not an easy task since it is not a mere transfer and substitutions of words. It requires a great cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds. The translator may have two options, whether to replace the ST sociolect with a TT sociolect on the condition that this latter preserves all the denotative and connotative meanings of the former, or to translate the ST sociolect with a standard language term which usually involves a loss of the connotative meanings resulting in an under-translation. Further research on idiolect, technolect and functilect is required to suggest a theoretical framework likely to enable translators to render these language varieties.

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