

HOW CULTURE AFFECTS THE BOOK TRANSLATION

Nguyen Thanh Nhan *

Abstract: Translation plays an important part in both Vietnamese literature and spiritual life. However, to reach well-translated works and documents, the translators have to face many troubles in handling cultural implications. This article discusses the relation and the cultural factors updated translation process. The factors would make the translated text change stay the same, change partially or the whole context. Thanks to that, the translators would aware of how to prepare not only their background knowledge but also their translation techniques during translation process.

Keywords: translation, culture, factors, different.

1. Problem statement

In recent years, when walking around bookstores and book streets, we have easily encountered foreign literary works, it can be said that the book market has never been so diverse and constantly updated as currently. On plenty of book-favorite- forums, groups of someone who like reading, book associations, book clubs, discussion topics, book reviewing pages, there mostly found translated works, either long novels or short stories, self-help books to develop skills, business and commerce books, even the Nobel Prize achieved works. The publications translated and published in Vietnam have become increasingly productive and updated continuously. Therefore, vietnamese readers would find deeper access to variety of literature originated from different countries, which facilitates their integration process into the world literature. In the context of globalization today, the introduction of foreign books

is both suitable for the tastes and needs of readers, and contributes to arousing and directing new compositions for the country's literature. It happens that the translated literature and translation market have been continuously growing day by day and take an important role in most community's lives.

Translation of any period should be originated from the cultural consciousness in translation. However, in recent years, it may be that the readers have become more and more serious with the translation quality, so many books have been badly commented publicly on its translated version quality such as *Finding the dragon lady - the mystery of Vietnam's madame Nhu (Madam Nhu Trần Lệ Xuân – Quyên lược Bà Rồng)* by Monique Brinson Demery - USA, *La carte et le territoire (Bản đồ và vùng đất)* by French author Michel Houllebec published by Literature Publishing House and Nha Nam Culture and Media Joint Stock

* Lecturer, Faculty of English Language Studies, HUBT

Company), or recently, *How To Build A Brilliant Business* (10 lời khuyên khởi nghiệp) written by Acorns, published by Alpha Books Joint-Stock Company. The fact is that mistakes in translation works are unavoidable, especially in translating publications, where translators need to convey not only the content but also the message that is the artistic characteristic as well as the author's implication. Therefore, in the translation field, the translators must be good enough at both foreign languages and their mother language, and also they need to own insight in a large cultural background to avoid cultural differences affecting the translation quality, and leading to possible errors such as mistranslations. It is hard to deny that translation is an effective and meaningful social tool. So is the translation influenced by social perspective? How do cultural factors affect translation? This article aims to provide an overview of cultural factors' influence on translation work in general and translated book publications in particular, thereby supporting translators to understand which knowledge and skills they need to overcome difficulties in translation process, and make the most of translation quality.

1.1. Definition of culture

“Culture” is often used with different meanings but the concept of “culture” can be referred to in two ways of approach: by broad sense or narrow sense. Understood in a narrow sense, culture is the value in each specific field such as social culture, business culture ... In addition, it is also the typical value of each region such as: Northern culture, Southern culture, ... In a broad sense, culture is all man made values. In the year of 1940, President Ho Chi Minh wrote: “Culture is the

combination of all human modes of living and its manifestations that created by mankind in order to adapt to the needs and demands of life and the requirements to survival.” [Ho Chi Minh 1995: 431].

Therefore, culture is an umbrella term which encompasses the social behavior and norms of all aspects found in human societies whether materially or spiritually. “Society” depicts an overview picture as being mentioned while “culture” makes mention of human life. In the Longman Encyclopedia, “Culture” is defined as the whole meaning, values, moral principles, modes of thinking, behaviors, expression of thoughts, spoken words, ways of living... Those are characteristics of each nation, community or social category. (1989: 271).

Besides, language and culture have always parallelly grown up because it is specially born by society, and associated with the cultural formation and development process of a nation, a country. A definition of “culture” by Peter Newmark wrote: “Is the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression” (1988: 94). Therefore, to learn and adopt a new language, it must be the need to consider the translation of that language in the appropriate cultural perspective.

1.2. Definition of translation

According to Andrew Chesterman's study in *Interpreting the Meaning of Translation* (2005), the word “translation” is derived from the Greek word “metapherein” and the word “transfere” in Latin, means conveying some message (*carrying something across*) (Chesterman, 2005, 5). Ghazzala (1995) defines translation as any process of conveying language meaning from one language to

another. The truth is that, translation is the work of transferring the information expressed in the source language into the target language while preserving fully its meaning and content implied. Or, according to the dictionary Mariam - Webster (1994) (quoted by Larson, 10.3), translation involves a change to a different substance, form, or appearance to become itself in another language.

Translation is an important means to not only open the integration door, but also bridge to shorten the cultural gap between the two nation, eliminate the differences between the two linguistic communities, thereby supporting those who do not bear with the same mother language can understand each other, and breaking difference gap between countries. Translation not only plays the role of content delivery, but also acts as a mean of cultural transfer.

2. The relation of cultural characteristics and book translation

There is a viewpoint that culture and translation are not inter-related or cross - affected. However, the fact has proved the close relation of these two concepts. It is the translation which clearly depicts the culture itself more sharply in a comparative relationship with the others. And this is achieved through cultural translation. On the other hand, if there is no culture, the translation cannot convey fully the content with the implication that the author wishes to send to the reader / listener. According to Toury (1978: 200), “translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions”. Therefore, translators always face the difficulties of how to process cultural features in the source text and find the most compatible

characteristics in the target text to convey rightly the hidden message.

Currently with the explosion of information technology, especially Google Translate, users only need to select the source language and target language, then enter text to translate into available blank cell, immediately results (translated text) will appear in the opposite black cell. Users evaluate that this is a useful tool, and may it can completely replace the human translator in the future; however, in essence, it is just a mechanical system, programmed based on a formation of word recognition and rendering equivalent results but not able to understand fully the implied message or meaning of the sentences. The cultural factors with profound layers by layers of elites in every language have not been counted in the above mentioned statement. For example, when the below sentence is entered for machine translation: “Ba tặng con món quà”, ridiculously, the result text “Three gave me a gift” appeared in the translated box. In essence, “ba” is the word that the South Vietnamese used to call their father. But it came out “three” - a word for counting number “3” in English as an equivalent word of other languages. This is just a small example of the countless “translation disasters” by Google Translation, so, it is the firm reason for us to take translation as a real intelligent working.

Carrying out the work of translating books, translators face many difficulties such as strange vocabulary, complex grammatical structures. Besides the two main difficulties in terms of this linguistic ability, the difficulties in socio-cultural factors account for a significant part. The translator must pay attention not

only to the whole book content but also to the socio-cultural elements because translation is not only about replacing the original text with a text in another language, but also facilitating the reader to access the implications hidden in the source text. To do this we need to understand non-linguistic elements and cross-cultural communication. Hermans (1996) wrote, “Previously, translation was considered as a conversion from one text to another, from one language to another. Today, translation is a complex process, taking place in the context of social and cultural communication. This requires the translator to place himself entirely in that picture of social interaction”.

Discussing translation compatibility, Nida compared that the importance of linguistic and cultural differences is equal, he also concluded that: “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for translators than due to differences in language structure” (Nida, 1964: 130). Therefore, cultural characteristics in the translation are as important as the semantics of words in the translation.

3. Cultural factors affecting book translation

For many book translators, the translating job takes a lot of time and effort not only by the big volume of the work but by the spirit and meaning hidden in that work. First of all to understand the spirit of the work, translators need to understand the context, background of the work as well as the culture of indigenous people. In the book “*Tiếng Việt văn Việt người Việt*” (*Vietnamese linguistics, literature and people*), Professor Cao Xuan Hao wrote: “There must be a certain connection between the voice of a nation

and its culture. Because language directly reflects the world perceptions and thinking of the shared community, while national culture cannot be unrelated to the way of perception and thinking formation” [Page 287]. For example, British/American English speakers are very concise, condensed and easy to understand; but the vocabulary is extremely diverse and close. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese language is rich in images and descriptive; the sentences need elaboration and smoothness. Not only that, the difficulty from such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax to the ideological mindset also has its own cultural characteristics.

It is possible to consider the cultural traits behind each translated document as a result of the process of exploring, researching, and considering possible possibilities before deciding on solutions for the final translation.

Therefore, if the translator is not willing to invest in reading documents of native speakers, it is difficult to identify the right context, as well as convey the appropriate meaning of well compiled sentences or works.

3.1 Cultural differences affecting translation

A translator without awareness of cultural context, as well as customs, traditions or idioms, background knowledge related to the translation but only convert source text into target text based on the word facing meaning could easily make mistakes, even serious misunderstandings in their translation.

For example, in the book *Madam Nhu Trần Lệ Xuân – Quyền lực Bà Rồng*, the translation reads Mr. Ngo Dinh Can as “**người anh chồng** (elder brother of husband) của bà Nhu” (page 19) or “**anh**

rể (husband of elder sister) của bà, Ngô Đình Cẩn, vẫn còn ở Việt Nam sau đảo chính” (page 310). However, in the fact Mr. Cẩn is the younger brother of Mr. Nhu, means that the correct translating must be “**em chồng** của bà Nhu”. Perhaps in the source text, the word “**brother**” in English is used for both younger or elder brother. This mistake is very difficult to avoid, requiring translators to be familiar with or really study the context of the situation during the translation process.

Another example, in the book titled “*10 lời khuyên khởi nghiệp*” published by Alphabooks, there is a sentence that: “Business is not a rocket science” (it means business is a different industry that is simpler than the science of rocket (Vietnamese: kinh doanh đâu phải là môn khoa học về tên lửa). To understand this advice, we must firstly understand that rocket science is a highly difficult field of study, the phrase “rocket science” is used to illustrate very difficult things; so this sentence can be translated as: “kinh doanh không hề khó tới vậy.” (means that business is not that kind of difficulty).” But, perhaps in Vietnam there is no rocket science industry, so it is difficult to catch fully the content’s meaning so it is translated into: “Kinh doanh không hề dễ dàng” (Doing business is not easy).

During the translation process, if we read the original text passively, refusing to take deep access to infer and understand the text correctly, it is difficult to deduce the right author’s intention and implication. Especially in the book translating, correct translating is not enough but well processed and inspiring translating must be taken for consideration. “Well processed and inspiring” means the translation needs to

be conveyed smoothly and sufficiently regarding to each vocabulary, phrases, and sentences to be received and accepted broadly and popularly by the readers. For example, with the title of top best-selling book “*How to win friends and influence people*”. (Vietnamese: Làm thế nào để chiến thắng và tạo ảnh hưởng tới người khác) by Dale Carnegie, the well-known translator Nguyen Hien Le has successfully adapted its title in to “*Đắc Nhân Tâm*”. The success mentioned here is that instead of literally translating from the original text and meaning, translator Nguyen Hien Le applied a pun with words derived from Chinese to create the translated title. Inherently, the vietnamese culture is much influenced by chinese culture, especially with chinese characters. Therefore, the title *Đắc Nhân Tâm* (reaching people’s hearts), the translator has brought readers a sense of serenity and lightness, but still depicts the profound and sufficient meaning of the original text.

Moreover, there are alliterative expressions, onomatopoeia, pictographic words (từ tượng hình) in Vietnamese which can be translated into the target language with the equivalent content easily but it is difficult to guarantee the semantic nuance equivalent because there is very few words in English used similarly as these kinds mentioned. Taking following examples: “lạnh”, “lạnh lẽo”, “lạnh lùng” are translated as “cold”; “héo”, “héo hon”, “héo hắt” are translated as “wither”. Or, Vietnamese people tend to take characteristics, appearance or form to name things, creating the basic meaning of the word. For example, the word “củ” can be used to refer to tubers that are buried deep in the ground (such as cassava tuber,

potato tuber, etc.) but also used to refer to tubers floating on the ground (kohlrabi tubers ...). However, in the English language, each of the tubers has a unique name without a common name for all.

Language has always been inherited and developed over the times; therefore, the same word but in different contexts, different background carried different nuances and meanings with it. For example, young generations are increasingly updating metaphorical words, using different images to simulate. In Vietnam in recent decades, there have been phrases such as “phi công trẻ lái máy bay bà già” (young pilots flying in an old plane” (referring to couples in love, in which the man is younger than woman), or even borrowed other images such as “Looking as dark as Mrs. Dau’s future” (Mrs Dau is a character in the book “Tắt Đèn” by writer Ngo Tat To; she is a very poor farmer at the most of the society that time, so she is oppressed and exploited; her future is filled with obscurity, and darkness). Even if the source text is written in the native language (as in the example above it is written in Vietnamese), the translator himself needs to master the trends, tendency, and understand the cultural characteristics of the times; or even need to understand the cultural characteristics when using literary images, or images with high popularity. In addition, to translate into the target language, we also need to understand the cultural trend of the target language to find appropriate illustrative images, counter-balance and equivalence, if not, the translation just can be processed on the surface. In conclusion, to be able to carry out the translation process, whatever aspect or stand the translator take, they

also must be a researcher, no matter they want it or not.

3.2 Cultural differences make a comprehensive transformation in the translated text

Each country has its own geographical, historical, customary and spiritual characteristics. It is a unique culture, specific to each nation. In translation, we also encounter those words and images that are rich in cultural features, so when translating into the target language, translators encounter many difficulties because it is difficult or even impossible to find comparable words, or images that can match in meaning or semantic content. For example, in western countries, it is normal for parents to kiss their children at the mouth but it is difficult to accept in eastern culture; so if translated literally, the reader will feel a totally different nuance of meaning from the translated text. Based on this perception, we can translate: “He kissed his daughter on the mouth” into “ông âu yếm ôm con gái mình” (he lovingly hugged his daughter).”

Vietnamese culture as well as Eastern countries largely influenced by Chinese culture, in which the dragon symbolizes very strong power. The Vietnamese consider the dragon as a symbol of prosperity and luck. However, in western culture the dragon is considered as a fierce monster that symbolizes cruelty and greed. Therefore, when translating the Bible, in order to convey the image of the dragon in English, the translator must find an equivalent descriptive noun such as “Cobra” or “Python” (the animals often cause bad evil in Vietnamese fairy tales). Or conversely, when conveying images of developed countries such as Japan, Singapore as “con rồng châu á

(asian dragons)”, translators will use the equivalent image in English as “tiger (con hổ)” rather than keeping the word “dragon” again.

For translation, one of the necessary skills is document researching, translators need a certain cultural understanding of the topic to be translated. For example, the phrase “Boxing Day”, if the literally translated (in translation called “translation word by word”) means “a day for boxing activity”. However, it is a holiday of England, on this day people will give gifts to the postmen and deliverers. Therefore, if you are not sure about the culture, it is inevitable to mistranslate.

In the work *And The Mountains echoed* (translation: *Và núi non vọng lại*), writer Khaled Hosseini wrote : “If culture was a house, then language was the key to the front door, to all the rooms inside” (temporary Translation: Nếu văn hóa là một ngôi nhà thì ngôn ngữ là chìa khóa mở ra cánh cửa chính để vào tất cả những căn phòng bên trong). This comparison shows the close connection between the language and culture of each country, and English and Vietnamese are no exception. Different cultures have elements that one country has, the other doesn’t and vice versa. This is most clearly expressed through idioms and proverbs. Specifically, the sentence *Carry coals to Newcastle*. Newcastle is an area with countless coal mines, so the proverb can translate the meaning into the phrase *Chở củi về rừng* (*Take woods to the forest*) in Vietnamese. In some contexts, the one can also be translated into *Đổ thêm dầu vào lửa* (*Adding Oil to a Fire*). However, translators can not find equivalent transliteration for every cases, then sometimes we have to interpret appropriately in terms of content; such

as the phrase “Bán anh em xa, mua láng giềng gần” (Selling far away brothers, buying close neighbors) can be translated as: “Having no relatives nearby, just depends on people around in need”.

In translation, we must always adhere to the principle of faithfulness to the original text, that is, how the author has written the source text, the translator still has to convey exactly that spirit and content. However, reading culture in Vietnam is also different from many other countries or nations, which also causes many difficulties. For example, when translating the exchange conversation of the two inmates, due to their starting point are homeless thief and robbers so their words could hurt your ears because it is so obscene and foul-mouthed. However, Vietnam as well as countries with eastern culture tend to dislike rude and sensitive words, especially in book works. Therefore, when translating, we have to choose flexibly the expressions for these. Respecting for the original text does not mean doing translation as a machine adhering to each word of the work (word by word translation).

4. Receiving translated work

Translation in general and book translation in particular play a significant role in the circulation of books works in the world. It is a bridge to access foreign and international knowledge. Therefore, the receiving translations own its criteria.

First of all, it is necessary to ensure the accuracy of the whole document with respect to the source text, without distorting and preventing the intention of the original document. The translation words must express the correct regional culture. For cultural disagreements, such as source language using sensitive, offensive

or combative words. At this occasion, it is necessary to select synonyms with the equivalent meaning to help readers understand and feel the expression nuance equivalent to the original. The selection of appropriate words in the target language also needs to be guaranteed in order to provide the closest meaningful text with the original one; avoiding to use a certain word causing mismatches, content “distortion” or “metamorphosis” for the readers to misunderstand.

Next, it is necessary to have a natural and coherent style, so it is necessary to overcome the various characteristics of the expressive culture in order to translate harmoniously for readers to understand easily and comfortably. In order to achieve this criterion, translators need to understand cultural background appropriately, nature and characteristics of the source text field. Translation is considered a multi-dimensional activity because the translator has to play both the role of reader and co-authors. Therefore, the translator is faced with the influence of two - way information reception, the first way to read the original text in its culture, then the second way is the reception of information that impact on processing translation. From understanding the author’s idea in the original text, to selecting words and expressions in the target language to ensure the full and correct meaning but not losing the hidden implication which requires translators to

undergo a quite hard and long process of learning and cultivating because learning a language is not just learning the words and expression but also learning more about the whole culture where it is used.

5. Conclusion

Translation is a difficult task, requiring translators to work hard on each page of original text and translated text. The translator must not only be fluent in foreign languages but also understand the history, culture, customs and practices of the country where their translated language was born. The study of cultural factors in ethnic groups when learning and using foreign languages in general as well as in translation process in particular plays a core role in building foundations, maintaining and developing skills and translation experience. So that it can bring out excellent translations, minimize avoidable errors. However, this process requires quite a lot of time and challenges, depending quite heavily on each field, different language context, social contexts. Therefore, more in-depth studies are needed to support learners, translators, and foreign language users. Hopefully, in the near future, there will be more and more scientific researches on cultural factors that directly affect translation, in particular, the translation of books so Vietnamese languages and literature are increasingly rich and diverse, and become sources of materials for people’s knowledge to improve and for readers to entertain./.

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VĂN HÓA CÓ TÁC ĐỘNG NHƯ THẾ NÀO ĐẾN VIỆC DỊCH SÁCH

Nguyễn Thanh Nhân

Tóm tắt: Bài báo này thảo luận về mối quan hệ và các yếu tố văn hóa ảnh hưởng tới việc dịch thuật. Các yếu tố văn hóa tác động tới văn bản dịch khiến bản dịch thay đổi ngữ cảnh, thay đổi một phần hoặc toàn bộ, hoặc được giữ nguyên. Qua đó người dịch hiểu được tầm quan trọng không chỉ kiến thức nền tảng mà còn cả kỹ thuật dịch trong quá trình dịch.

Từ khóa: Dịch thuật, văn hóa, tính dị biệt.