THE RELATIONS BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN ADVERTISEMENT TRANSLATION

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the relations between language and culture in the translation of advertisements and to put forth some suggestions for the improvement of this activity. Since an advertisement is an example of the polyphonic use of language the translator of the text has to clearly identify the voices in the advertising message and to adapt this message to the peculiarities of the target culture and target audience.

Key-words: culture, language, advertising, copy-writer, translation

The Relations between Culture and Language

From a sociological point of view, culture includes shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles and values found with the speakers of a particular language who live during the same historical period in a specific geographical region. Language, time and place help define culture.

The relation between culture and language is a two-way relation. Language is an expression of culture and language in its turn influences culture.

E. Sapir and B. Worf hypothesized that the language people speak shapes their perceptions of the world and ultimately their behaviour (Usunier, 1993: 99).

Moreover, people in a given culture place high value on certain types of behaviour, ideas or material possessions. These instances are then mirrored in the language of that culture and the language develops concepts and notions so that those concerns can be easily communicated among the members of that culture. The vocabulary includes nouns and verbs that describe actions associated with the nouns. Sometimes the development of a language to

meet a culture's concerns leads to a situation in which translations from that language may become difficult. It is likely that most potential target language do not have the same development as the source language. Thus it will be difficult (not necessarily impossible) to depict certain concerns in one language as compared to another.

Language illustrates culture. Expressions of culture are particularly recognizable in the use of metaphors. For instance, in Egypt, the sun is perceived as cruel, so a girl will not be described as "my sunshine", but may be compared with moonlight (Hofstede, 1994).

Some languages have more words for one thing than for others. Some languages have words that have no correspondent in others. Some culture specific words migrate to other languages if they express something unique (Hofstede, 1994: 213). Often such words reflect the specific values of a culture. For example: *management*, *computer*, *apartheid*, *geisha*, *sauna*, *Mafia*, *kamikaze*.

Some words depict interpersonal relations in one culture that do not exist in others. For instance, the French notions *savoir faire* and *savoir vivre* include a vast number of values specific to French culture and cannot be properly translated. Grammar and writing systems have consequences on perception and memory. For example, Chinese speakers rely more on visual representations, whereas English speakers rely on phonological representations (verbal sounds) (de Mooij, 2004: 188).

Not only words but also numbers contain a cultural connotation and can cause misinterpretation or distortion of the message in different cultures. For example, many hotels in the USA or U.K. do not have a room 13 or a 13th floor. Similarly, Nippon Airways in Japan do not have the seats number 4 or 9. If there are numbers with negative connotations advertisers should avoid them.

Metaphors represent cultural artefacts. For instance, the advertisements for LG and Infonet represent metaphors that will not be understood at the global level. Korean LG uses a fish, symbolizing prosperity in Asia but which is not understood in most parts of the Western world.

Infonet refers to an original German fairy tale written by brothers Grimm, which may not be well understood in other countries of the world.

Language, Culture and Communication in Advertising

Of all the cultural elements a marketer should study to gain more degree of empathy, language may be one of the most difficult to master. Advertising being based on language and communication is the most culture-bound element of the marketing mix.

In international advertising the process of communicating to a target audience is more complex as communication takes place against multiple *contexts* which may differ in terms of language, literacy, customs, beliefs and other cultural factors. Moreover, media differ in carrying different appeals. A message may fail to get to the target audience because of people's inability to understand it because they misinterpret the message by attaching different meanings to the words or symbols used. It is a matter of common knowledge that the art of advertising is to develop messages and symbols that can be easily understood by the intended audience. In international advertising these messages and symbols have originated in one culture and cannot be decoded in a similar way by members of other cultures. There are also other reasons such as: people do not respond to the message because of lack of income to buy the advertised product or they are not interested in that product.

Media limitations may also play a part in the failure to communicate with the target audience.

The process of communication in international advertising involves several steps, i.e.:

- first the advertiser determines the appropriate message for the target audience

- next the message is encoded so that it can be clearly understood in different cultural contexts

- then the message is sent via media channels to the audience who then decodes the message and responds to it. At this stage, cultural barriers may distort the effective transmission and result in communication breakdown.

In encoding an advertising message, care needs to be taken in *translation*. The specialist literature provides plenty of examples of translation problems. For example, when the American Dairy Association entered Mexico with its "Got Milk?" advertising campaign, the Spanish translation read "Are you lactating?"

Furthermore, a low level of literacy may result in the need to use visual symbols.

Some cultures tend to use more symbols in advertising than others. This is related to writing and language. For instance, the Japanese and other Asians using Kanji script seem to have greater ability to use and perceive symbols.

The cultural context may also impede the effectiveness of communication. In high context cultures such as the Asian cultures of Japan and China, the context in which the information is embedded is as important as the message (what is said) (Hall, 1976).
In low context cultures, which include most western societies, the information is usually contained in the verbal message. In these cultures, it is important to provide adequate information relating to the product (good or service) in order to satisfy their need for content

(de Mooy, 1998). Conversely, people in high context cultures are often more effectively reached by images and mood appeals and rely on personal networks for information and content. Awareness of these differences in communication is essential to ensure effective communication.

A consequence of this would be that the more meaningful advertising is in its source language the less translatable it becomes in the target language.

That is the reason why advertising copywriters should be less concerned with the obvious differences between languages and more concerned with the idiomatic meanings expressed.

Translation Blunders in International Advertising

Advertising is a means of developing strong brands. When companies decide to go international, one of the first things they have to consider is how to internationalize their brand names.

Translating brand names into other languages can be risky. The specialist literature cites a long list of translation blunders.

One of the quickest ways of destroying the global image is to give a product an unattractive name. And when it comes to brand names that sound embarrassing in translation, no one has made as many spectacular mistakes as the car industry. General Motors' Nova (*No va* means *It doesn't go* in Spanish) has of course become a classic. Another example is the Ford Pinto – in Portuguese *pinto* is slang for a small male organ. Understandably, Brazilians weren't queuing up to become the proud owners of a Pinto. Rolls Royce, however with its elegantly named *Silver Cloud*, *Silver Shadow*, *Silver Spirit* and *Silver Ghost* rightly felt it was above such embarrassments. Until they realised that the German launch of the evocatively named *Silver Mist* was probably doomed to failure. Mist, they were informed just in time, means dung or animal excrement in German. But changing the name of a product at the last minute can be expensive business. In Taiwan, the translation of the Pepsi slogan 'Come alive with the Pepsi generation' came out as 'Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead'.

In Italy, a campaign for Schweppes Tonic Water translated the name as Schweppes toilet water.

Colgate introduced a toothpaste in France called Cue, the name of a French pornographic magazine.

When Parker marketed a pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say. 'It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you'. However, the company translated 'embarrass' as 'embarazar' which means 'to become pregnant'. When Braniff Airlines translated a slogan for its comfortable seats, 'fly in leathers' it came out in Spanish as 'fly naked'.

Another classic language blunder was offered by the world-famous Coca-Cola. When the company first marketed Coke in China in the 1920's, it developed a group of Chinese characters that when pronounced sounded like the product name. Unfortunately the characters actually translated mean 'bite the wax tadpole'. Now, the characters on Chinese Coke bottles are translated as 'happiness in the mouth' (Ricks, 1996: 50).

And examples of such blunders (messages 'lost in translation') can go on end.

Specific Strategies to be Used in Advertisement Translation

One general criterion of translation quality is that the source and target versions 'produce a similar response' on the part of the audience (Nida, 1964: 164).
Debates on the key concepts of equivalence range from the school of Leipzig, the studies of W. Koller (1979) or E. Nida (1982) to authors like Newmark (1997), or Catford (1998).

E. Nida does not recommended identity but equivalence in the sense of equal value or similar equivalence (Nida, 1982: 24). The best translation should not sound like a translation.

In translating advertisements, the translator also needs to be aware of the degree of intertextuality. Advertisements usually borrow elements from all discourse types but they use them for their own purposes. Moreover, they exist in various media and genres.

The pictures used in the advertisements can help the translator decode the meaning of an ambiguous text.

V. Negrea (2006) suggests that a combination of principles from *linguistic theory* (discourse analysis) and *semiotics* can help the translator successfully approach the cultural elements in an advertisement and identify the cultural codes and find equivalents in the target culture and target language.

According to the semiotic theory (Pierce, 1990: 47-48) a specific culture represents a semiotic system. This system consists of linguistic and non-linguistic elements. When translating an advertisement, the translator would transfer the signs from one system into another.

In the translation situation this means that:

• the sign in the target text should be acceptable to the users of that sign, i.e. culture

• the meaning of the message generated by the sign in the target text must have an equivalent effect on the target audience

Before starting to translate an advertisement the translator should analyse the text at various levels by answering various questions:

• **language-oriented** (what is advertised, who is the audience?, what part is played by the text?, what references are made?, is humour used?, questions about style, register, tone, etc.

• identifying **the medium, genre** and **context**

• identifying the **syntagmatic structures** (narrative or argumentative)

• identifying **the figures of speech** (metonyms, metaphors, etc)

• identifying instances of **intertextuality** (references to other genres, or comparison with other texts within the genre)

• identifying **semiotic codes** (codes specific to the medium, codes shared with other media, the mode of address, etc.).

The translator has to consider the various alternatives regarding the choice of words, word function, style, register, tone, etc. (Negrea, 2006: 41); all these elements have to match the context of the advertisement.

A somehow similar analysis of the text to be translated is recommended by A. Bantaş (1988, 1991). He recommends the translation-oriented text analysis (TOTA). This analysis includes seven stages of the translation process at all levels and such an analysis can be done by the translator alone (Bantaş 1993: 44).

The above-mentioned analysis perfectly matches the psycholinguistic method put forward by the dynamic-contextual analysis (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1988) and highlights all the psycholinguistic aspects of the translation process. It is a multifarious, global analysis of the original message.

Such a complex analysis will help the translator avoid two types of difficulties or pitfalls which could appear in the translation process:

1. Difficulties of A type whose solving calls for the knowledge of the general background, the whole cultural context, taking into account the elements specific to the respective countries, specifications, ranks, jobs, personal titles, denominations, measuring units, proper names, toponyms, special registers, etc.

2. Difficulties of B type which include the changes deliberately made by the writer (copywriter in the case of advertisements).

Consequently the *translation competence* reflects the translator's ability to mediate between two languages and ultimately between two different cultures. He has to analyse, compare and convert two cultural systems. Therefore, the translator permanently works within each culture taken separately, but he also compares and converts one culture into another (Hewson and Martin, 1001: 135).

Final remarks

Of all the cultural elements a marketer should deal with when trying to enter a foreign market, language may be one of the most difficult to master. Many believe that to appreciate fully the true meaning of a language it is necessary to live with the language for years. Whether this is true or not, foreign marketers should never take it for granted that they are effective communications in another language. The aid of a national within the foreign country should be seriously considered; even then the problem of effective communication may exist. One authority (Cateora, 1987: 106) suggests a cultural translator, a person who translates not only among languages but also among different ways of thinking, among different cultures, as a means of overcoming the problem of communication failure.

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