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Non-cognitive causes of imprecision in consecutive interpreting in diplomatic settings in light of functionalism

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Abstract

The translation literature is replete with discussions on the need of precision in interpretation. However, the functional theories, for instance, emphasize the role of function rather than precision, as being of primary importance. This study is aimed to highlight this priority in diplomatic settings where imprecise renderings may be needed by consecutive interpreter for subject-specific reasons. These causes are, mainly, non-cognitive, and classified into 3 groups in the paper, namely, commissioner-, commission- and commissionee-originated causes. It is suggested that in the consecutive interpreting of “sensitive” diplomatic texts, precision is not necessarily a norm. Though the research was made with Turkish-English language pair, the general conclusion of the unsuitability of maintaining blind faith in precision can readily be applied to any other language pair in the process of interpreting, in such sensitive settings.

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1. Introduction

In the translation literature, precision has generally been considered to relate to a standardized terminology, which is regarded as the most powerful tool available for specialists to express themselves, to exchange views and to organize the structure of their respective disciplines within a specific scientific domain (Cabr e et al., 1999, p. 45). Focusing on the use of terminology, “limiting the use of synonymous expressions” (Strehlow, 1988), analyzes, have highlighted

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lexical units and cross-linguistic constraints from a cognitive perspective, which can be explained as relating to or involving conscious mental activities such as thinking, understanding, learning and remembering (Merriam-Webster, 2016). Non-cognitive issues received far less attention in translation studies, apart from a few exceptions (Baker, 1997). In fact, non-cognitive issues play a role, not less, if not more, important than the cognitive ones.

This paper is intended to analyze the possible non-cognitive causes for imprecision in consecutive interpreting of sensitive texts in diplomatic setting. In such settings, each and every word is carefully weighed and reacted to accordingly by all the parties involved. The “sensitivity” of a setting arises from the following features, as specified by Schäffner (1997) within the framework of political texts: i. a change intentionally made in a text which would change its function, e.g. transforming a persuasive text into an informative one. ii. The use of texts in negotiations, in which the role of the text is different from its intended purpose in the production stage. iii. different interpretations of the same lexical unit for specific political or ideological purposes. The diplomatic setting, reflecting all sensitive features mentioned above, is sensitive ‘par excellence’.

The paper uses functionalism as theoretical framework to indicate why imprecision may be encountered in consecutive interpreting, in diplomatic settings. As it is known, the skopos theory put forward by Vermeer is based on the translation’s being produced “for particular recipients with specific purpose(s) in a given situation” (1989). In the field of diplomacy, the overall skopos of interpreting of diplomatic texts is to establish and maintain desirable international relations, by its very nature. The deviations that occur in practice, in no respect, invalidate the relevant norms and traditions. The texts in this field are generally seen as informative and/or operative texts, as classified by Nord (1997). Introducing the terms, commissioner, commissioner, commissionee, for the very first time, Holz-Mänttari (1984) stated that the interpreter can be regarded as an expert providing an intercultural transfer. According to the skopos given by the commissioner, the interpreters can vary their approach to be target or source-oriented. Changes are made as appropriate in the target text with the aim of providing a sound communication. According to Nord (2006, p. 33), this responsibility is called “loyalty” in the skopos theory, as a replacement for the classical translation studies term “fidelity”. However, in order to act responsibly, interpreters “must be allowed the freedom to decide in co-operation with their clients what is in their best interests.” (Honig, 1998, p. 10)

This paper emphasizes the need to prioritize function, rather than precision, through analysis based on examples in diplomatic settings in consecutive interpreting from English into Turkish and vice versa. The aim is to describe the possible causes for imprecision in consecutive interpreting in diplomatic settings based on the functionalist approach. In what follows, the design of the study will be explained by stating its limitations and explaining corpus selection, and then offer a relevant classification for the reasons of imprecision, though it is not claimed that the classification is exhaustive.

2. Limitations

For the purposes of this study, the cognitive factors causing imprecision in such settings were excluded.

As diplomatic settings require confidentiality, recording is generally not welcomed except for in-house transcription purposes. The strict security measures prevent researchers making use of transcriptions, apart from those published in press. The purpose of the personal inferences made in this paper is purely to denote those issues not mentioned before in literature, and it is recognized that those inferences may be subject to further analysis and interpretation.

Imprecision is as an abstract and complicated issue, and the classification made here is purely to facilitate the analysis, and to indicate that, in regard to diplomatic setting, precision may not be essential or even valuable at all times.

3. Corpus selection

Instances of imprecision were collected as purposive sampling from verbal sources, news, coupled with personal experiences, and classified according to possible causes. For the purposes of this study, we will mainly deal with such constraints leading the interpreter to be imprecise.

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