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The emotional impact of translation: A heart rate study

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Abstract

The present work explores the question of whether the adoption of a certain translation strategy can alter the effect that a translated text may cause on a given audience. With this aim, an experimental study was designed to measure whether the loss of metaphoricity in the translation of figurative expressions may actually result in the audience's diminished emotional response to the translation as compared with the one prompted by the metaphorical image. The heart rate of a group of Spanish participants was measured to assess the emotional impact of a series of metaphorical vs. non-metaphorical translations of English figurative expressions based on four basic emotions: happiness, sadness, rage and fear. Results report significant differences between metaphorical and non-metaphorical translations for the four emotions analysed, pointing to a difference in their emotional impact on the recipients of the translation.

Keywords: Translation; Metaphors; Emotions; Reception

1. The translation of metaphors

The ubiquity of metaphor is overpowering. The distinction between 'conceptual metaphor' and 'linguistic metaphor' postulated by Cognitive Linguistics certainly has contributed to acknowledge the power of metaphor as a manifestation of the potential of human cognition. Metaphors determine not only the linguistic expressions that we use to describe reality, but also the way we think and conceive of the world around us. They are basic cognitive resources that structure our daily experience and therefore pervade every aspect of our interaction with the world. Thus, when we define our mood as *being overflowing with happiness* or *boiling with anger*, the images selected are not chosen to illustrate our metaphorical abilities. Rather, these expressions reflect metaphors that shape our worldview and conceive of happiness and anger as fluids in a container—which in the case of anger is uncomfortably hot. Moreover, the use of these metaphors is not without consequences; they motivate a number of inference patterns or entailments that may sometimes include specific behavioural patterns. For instance, we expect intense anger to produce steam (*I was fuming*), pressure on the person (*He was bursting with anger*) and eventually make the person explode (*She blew up at me*) (Lakoff, 1992:381).

The pervasiveness of metaphor is such that—given the option—speakers tend to prefer metaphorical expressions to refer to many aspects of reality, especially when aiming to imprint emphasis or emotion on our discourse. In this sense, metaphorical sentences have been recently proven to be more emotionally engaging than their literal counterparts; for example, Citron and Goldberg (2014) report greater activation of the amygdala for metaphorical sentences, a brain area typically associated with processing of intense emotional stimuli. They argue that their findings provide initial evidence that

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conventional metaphorical expressions are more emotionally engaging, being therefore chosen over literal expressions because of their greater emotionally evocative power.

This ubiquity of metaphor, both in literary and everyday language, is also one of the reasons why metaphors pose a great challenge for translators, being one of the central topics in translation studies. As Schäffner (2004:1256) observes, the theoretical debate on the translation of metaphor has revolved around two main issues: its translatability, and the procedures or strategies used to transfer it from a source language (SL, henceforth) to a target one (TL). These two issues actually represent two sides of the same coin, the central concern being the debate about the possibility or impossibility to translate a metaphorical image from a given language and culture to others inevitably different. Translatability issues were first addressed by adopting a prescriptive approach that aimed to regulate the different translation procedures available by establishing a suitable set of norms (Samaniego Fernández, 2013). This type of normative approach has mainly focused on providing exhaustive typological classifications of metaphors and full lists of translation procedures, which serve to achieve either a total equivalence by reproducing image and sense—what Van den Broeck (1981) referred to as *translation in* '*sensu stricto*'— or a partial one by reproducing at least one of the two. In van den Broeck's classification, this can be achieved through *substitution* (when the image is replaced by a TL one with similar meaning) or *paraphrasis* (when meaning is translated without retaining the metaphorical image).

For a long time, translation scholars believed that the answer to the problem of translating metaphor was to be found in classifications that determine the level of metaphor translatability by identifying their degree of novelty or conventionalisation. Most simple typologies identify two types of metaphors at each end of a ± novelty/± lexicalisation continuum. Thus, Dickins (2005) distinguishes two main types, namely, lexicalised vs. non-lexicalised metaphors. Similarly, Snell-Hornby (1988) speaks of novel and dead metaphors, although she admits that a whole range of intermediate degrees would be placed between these two extremes. In order to clarify the nature of all those intermediate cases, some authors have proposed tripartite classifications, which posit two extreme types and a third central category including more or less institutionalised intermediate cases. Some examples of this type of classification are van den Broeck's (1981) distinction between lexicalised, conventional and private metaphors, or Rabadán Álvarez (1991) differentiation between lexicalised, traditional and novel metaphors. More problematic, however, are those typologies based on differences that are far too subtle to be of practical use. Newmark (1988a,b), for instance, distinguishes up to five different types of metaphors: lexicalised, cliché, standard, adapted and novel. While the two extremes—that is, lexicalised and novel—coincide with those of dichotomic typologies, the greatest problems arise when differentiating between the more central or intermediate types, which seem to refer to different types of phraseological units: certain types of stereotyped collocations ('clichés'), literary metaphors assimilated by use ('standard') and certain types of idioms ('adapted').

All this effort to provide a typology based on the degree of lexicalisation of the metaphor is grounded on the assumption that the key to a successful translation is selecting the most adequate translation procedure for each type. Thus, most creative metaphors are often reproduced by literal translation procedures, whereas more conventional ones either frequently undergo a substitution process, replacing the SL image for a TL one, or are paraphrased, keeping the meaning at the cost of the image. Besides its prescriptive nature, this type of approach has also been criticised for applying primarily linguistic criteria while neglecting other professional, cultural and cognitive factors that play a leading role in the translation of metaphorical expressions (Samaniego Fernández, 2013; Rojo, 2014). Although the usefulness of this kind of typologies is obvious from a theoretical and pedagogical point of view, they still overlook the role of the audience, conveniently placing the recipient of the translation in the background. The efforts of functionalist approaches in the 70s to vindicate the role of receptors underlined the importance of reproducing the pragmatic function, but still failed to notice the role of cognitive factors, such as the emotional impact caused by a translated metaphor.

In all fairness, the issue of the emotional impact of a translation has been a question frequently neglected in translation studies, most probably because it involves psychological and physiological factors that initially seemed to be beyond the reach of translation scholars. But the 'interdisciplinary turn' undertaken by translation studies in recent years has cleared the ground for the exploration of factors and issues that were once unattainable. And the difference in the emotional impact between metaphorical and non-metaphorical translations of figurative expressions is at last within the reach of translation scholars (see for instance the work by Lehr (2011a,b, 2012a,b) on the impact of emotions on translation performance and expertise, and the work by Ramos (2013) on the emotional impact of audio-description). Psychology and literary studies are two of the disciplines that have opened the doors to the study of the emotional impact of metaphor in translation studies. The following section summarises the main methods developed in these areas to analyse the emotional impact of metaphors.

2. Measuring the emotional impact of metaphors

Measuring the emotional impact of metaphors is by no means a straightforward task; existing attempts can be traced back to evidence from two research areas: studies on *foregrounded* language and research on emotions.