

Chapter 2 Kinds of Translations

Literal versus idiomatic

Because a given text has both form and meaning, as discussed in the previous chapter, there are two main kinds of translations. One is form-based and the other is meaning-based.

Form-based translations attempt to follow the form of the source language and are known as literal translations. Meaning-based translations make every effort to communicate the meaning of the source language text in the natural forms of the receptor language. Such translations are called idiomatic translations.

An interlinear translation is a completely literal translation. For some purposes, it is desirable to reproduce the linguistic features of the source text, as for example, in a linguistic study of that language. Although these literal translations may be very useful for purposes related to the study of the source language, they are of little help to speakers of the receptor language who are interested in the meaning of the source language text. A literal translation sounds like nonsense and has little communication value. For example:

Chuave (Papua New Guinea): kan daro

Literal translation: your-name call!

This literal translation makes little sense in English. The appropriate translation would be What is your name?

If the two languages are related, the literal translation can often be understood, since the general grammatical form may be similar. However, the literal choice of lexical items makes the translation sound foreign. The following bilingual announcement was overheard at an airport (Barnwell 1980:18).

Literal English: Madame Odette, passenger with destination Douala, is demanded on the telephone.

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This English version is a literal translation of the French

French: Madame Odette, passager à destination de Douala, est demandée au téléphone.

An idiomatic translation into English would be:

translation. It sounds like it was written originally in the receptor language. Therefore, a good translator will try to translate idiomatically. This is his goal. However, translations are often a mixture of a Literal transfer of the grammatical units along with some idiomatic translation of the meaning of the text. It is not easy to consistently translate idiomatically. A translator may express some parts of his translation in very natural forms and then in other parts fall back into a literal form. Translations fall on a continuum from very literal, to literal, to modified literal, to near idiomatic, to idiomatic, and then may even move on to be unduly free (see Display 2.1).

Idiomatic English: Ms. Odette, passenger for Douala, you are wanted on the phone.

literal literal

modified literal

inconsistent near mixture idiomatic

unduly idiomatic free

Except for interlinear translations, a truly literal translation is uncommon. Most translators who tend to translate literally actually make a partially modified literal translation. They modify the order and grammar enough to use acceptable sentence structure in the receptor language. However, the lexical items are translated literally. Occasionally, these are also changed to avoid complete nonsense or to improve the communication. However, the result still does not sound natural. Notice the following example from a language in Papua New Guinea:

L

ro chombo ngusifu pamarthomandi

ler heart I-fastened-her I fastened her in my heart.

(literal) (modified literal)

The modified literal translation changes the order into English structure. However, the sentence still does not communicate in clear English. An idiomatic translation would have used the form: "I never forgot her," or "I've kept her memory in my heart."

A person who translates in a modified literal manner will change the grammatical forms when the constructions are obligatory. However, if he has a choice, he will follow the form of the source text even though a different form might be more natural in the receptor language. Literal and modified literal translations consistently err in that they choose literal equivalents for the words, i.e., the lexical items being translated. Literal translations of words, idioms, figures of speech, etc., result in unclear, unnatural, and sometimes nonsensical translations. In a modified literal translation, the translator usually adjusts the translation enough to avoid real nonsense and wrong meanings, but the unnaturalities still remain.

Idiomatic translations use the natural forms of the receptor language, both in the grammatical constructions and in the choice of lexical items. A truly idiomatic translation does not sound like a

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Display 2.1 Unduly free translations are not considered acceptable translations for most purposes. Translations are unduly free if they add extraneous information not in the source text, if they change the meaning of the source language, or if they distort the facts of the historical and cultural setting of the source language text. Sometimes unduly free translations are made for purposes of humor or to bring about a special response from the receptor language speakers. However, they are not acceptable as normal translations. The emphasis is on the reaction of those reading or hearing it and the meaning is not necessarily the same as that of the source language.

In one translation, the source text said, "I was glad when Stephanos, Fortunah and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such mer desene recognition. It was translated, "It sure is good to see Steve, Laicky and "Big Bam'. They sorta make up for your not being here. They're a big boost to both me and you all. Let's give them a big hand." The purpose of the translation was to make an ancient text seem contemporary, but the result is an unduly free translation.

The translator's goal should be to reproduce in the receptor language a text which communicates the same message as the source language but using the natural grammatical and lexical choices of the receptor language. His goal is an idiomatic translation. In the chapters

which follow, the many details involved in producing such a translation will be discussed. The basic overriding principle is that an

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20 OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION TASK idiomatic translation reproduces the meaning of the source language (that is, the meaning intended by the original communicator) in the natural form of the receptor language.

However, there is always the danger of interference from the form of the source language. The study of many translations shows that in order to translate idiomatically a translator will need to make many adjustments in form. Some examples of the kinds of adjustment which will need to be made are discussed below as general background to show the need for the more detailed study which follows in later chapters. Translating grammatical features

Parts of speech are language specific. Each language has its own division of the lexicon into classes such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Different languages will have different classes and subclasses. It will not always be possible to translate a source language noun with a noun in the receptor language. For example, Indo-European languages have many nouns which really refer to actions. Most languages will prefer to express actions as verbs rather than nouns. A translator in Papua New Guinea (from Deibler and Taylor 1977:1060) was asked by a patrol officer to translate the Eight-Point Improvement Plan for Papua New Guinea (Papua New Guinea: Central Planning Office 1973). One of the points reads, "Decentralization of economic activity, planning and government spending, with emphasis on agricultural development, village industry, better internal trade, and more spending channeled through local and area bodies." Such sentences are very difficult for translators who want to translate into the indigenous languages of the country. Words such as decentralization, activity, planning, government spending, emphasis, development, and trade would have to be rendered by verbs in most languages. When verbs are used, then, the appropriate subject and object of the verb may need to be made explicit also. The form in the receptor language is very different from the source language form and yet this kind of adjustment, using verbs rather than nouns, must be made in order to communicate the message. An idiomatic translation was made which used verbs as in the following:

Most languages have a class of words which may be called pronouns. Pronominal systems vary greatly from language to language, and the translator is obliged to use the forms of the receptor language even though they may have very different meanings from the pronouns of the source language. For example, if one is translating into Kiowa (USA), the pronouns will have to indicate a difference between singular, dual, and plural person even though the source language does not make this three-way distinction. Or if a translator is translating into Balinese (Swellengrebel 1963:158), he must distinguish degrees of honor even though nothing in the source language indicates these distinctions. He will need to understand the culture of the Balinese and the cultural context of the text he is translating in order to choose correctly.

In English, the first person plural pronoun we is often used when the real meaning is second person you. The reason for the use of we is to show empathy and understanding. The nurse says to the sick child, "It's time for us to take our medicine now." Or the teacher says, "We're not going to shout, we'll walk quietly to our places. Clearly, the pronouns do not refer to the nurse or

the teacher but to the children whom she is addressing, you. In translating these pronouns into another language, a literal translation with first person plural would probably distort the meaning. The translator would need to look for the natural way to communicate second person, and the feeling of empathy carried by the source language sentences.

Grammatical constructions also vary between the source language and the receptor language. The order, for example, may be completely reversed. The following simple sentence from Gabuku (Papua New Guinea) is given with a morpheme-by-morpheme literal translation underneath (data from Deibler):

mali ako alitove loilo oni-loka lemons some get-will-I saying town-to
g
sove o-will

The government wants to decrease the work it does for businesses and what it plans, and the money it spends in the capital, and wants to increase what people and groups in local areas do to help farmers and small businesses whose owners live in villages, and help people in this country buy and sell things made in this country, and to help local groups spend the government's money.

It will readily be seen that a somewhat understandable translation into English requires a complete reversal of the order: / will go to town saying, "I will get some lemons. A more idiomatic translation would read / will go to town to get some lemons. In order to have an understandable English form, the order must be changed completely and follow English grammatical patterns. In addition, the direct quote which signaled purpose in Gabuku must be changed to the equivalent English form for purpose clauses.

It is not uncommon that passive constructions will need to be translated with an active construction or vice versa, depending on the

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natural form of the receptor language. In Japanese (Wallace 1977:1-2), there is a passive form with the suffix *rare*. Notice the two sentences below:

Active:

Sensed We Taro

sikatta. Teacher topic Taro accusative scold-perfect.

The teacher scolded Taro.

Passive

Taro Taro

wa Sense! ni sikarareia. topic teacher dative scold passive perfect. Taro was scolded by the teacher.

The English translation of all three would be: His fever went down, or His temperature returned to normal.

All languages have Idioms, i.e., a string of words whose meaning is different than the meaning conveyed by the individual words. In English to say that someone is Dull-headed means that the person is

stubborn, "The meaning has little to do with bull or head. Languages abound in such idioms. The following are a few English idioms using into and in: run into debt, run into a friend, Step into a practice, fly into a passion, spring into notice, jump into a fight, dive into a book, wade into adversity, break into society, stumble into acquaintance, glide into intimacy, fall in love. In spite of all these combinations, one cannot say the following: break into debt, fall into print, wade into practice, etc. The combinations are fixed as to form and their meaning comes from the combination. A literal word-for-word translation of these idioms into another language will not make sense. The form cannot be kept, but the receptor language word or phrase which has the equivalent meaning will be the correct one to use in the translation

The following idioms occur in the Apinaye language of Brazil (Ham 1965:2). In the first column is a literal translation from Apinayé. In the second is an idiomatic translation. The literal English is misleading

However, it is not simply that there are two forms and so translations into Japanese may use either. The passive sentences are used primarily when the subject is portrayed as suffering" (Wallace 1977:2). In traditional Japanese style, this is the only use of the passive verb with-(r)are. Many source Language passives cannot be translated into Japanese with a passive since this would give the wrong meaning, the idea of suffering. Grammatical choices in the translation must be based on the function of the grammatical construction in the receptor language, not on a literal rendition of a source Language form.

The above are only examples to show some types of grammatical adjustments which will result if a translator translates idiomatically. Seldom will a text be translated with the same form as that which occurs in the source language. Certainly, there will be times when by coincidence they match, but a translator should translate the meaning and not concern himself with whether the forms turn out the same or not. Translating lexical features

Each language has its own idiomatic way of expressing meaning through lexical items (words, phrases, etc.). Languages abound in idioms, secondary meanings, metaphors, and other figurative meanings. For example, notice the following ways in which a fever is referred to (literal translations are given to show the source language for):

LITERAL I don't have my eye on you. I've already buried my eye. I'll pull your eyelid My eye is hard on you. I'll do it with my head.

IDIOMATIC I don't remember you. I'm already ready to go I'll ask a favor of you. I remember you. I'll do it the way I think It should be done. He is spoiled
His car is rotten.

Greele The fever left him. Aguarana: He cooled. Docano: The fever was no more in him, Translators who want to make a good idiomatic translation often find figures of speech especially challenging. A literal translation of blind as a bat might sound really strange in a language where the comparison between a blind person and a bat has never been used as a figure of speech. In Aguaruna it would be more natural to say blind as a fox. There is a legend in which the sun borrowed the fox's eyes and then returned to heaven taking the fox's good eyes with him and leaving the fox with the sun's inferior eyes. That is why they say, when the fox is trying to see, he stretches back his head and looks with his

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throat. Figures of speech are often based on stories of historical incidents. Many times, the origin of the figure is no longer apparent.

Nanes of animals are used metaphorically in most languages. But the comparison is often different and so the figure will be misunderstood unless some adjustment is made. For example, when someone is called a pig in English, it usually means he is dirty or a greedy eater. In languages of Mexico, it has different meanings. In Mixteco, it means the person is stupid, in Tzeltal, that he sleeps on the ground; in Aztec, that he is drunk; and in Otomí, that the person is immoral. Care would need to be taken if pig were used metaphorically or a wrong meaning might result in the receptor language.

In some languages, certain words can only be expressed by the use of a quotation and the verb say. For example, the Waiwal of Guyana do not have a special word for promise, praise, deny, and other similar words. These must be translated by the word say and a quotation as follows (Hawkins 1962:164):

even though it may be very different from the source language form. In the early days, men like Cicero and Horace insisted that one must translate the general sense and force of the language. Literal translations are laughed out of court. Horace stated that a faithful translator will not translate word-for-word. Jerome said that two things are necessary for a good translation -- an adequate understanding of the original language (the source language) and an adequate command of the language into which one is translating (the receptor language).

But considering the complexity of language structures, how can a translator ever hope to produce an adequate translation? Literalists can only be avoided by careful analysis of the source language: by, first of all, understanding clearly the message to be communicated. A translator who takes the time to study carefully the source language text, to write a semantic analysis of it, and then to look for the equivalent way in which the same message is expressed naturally in the receptor language, will be able to provide an adequate, and sometimes brilliant, translation. His goal must be to

void literalisms and to strive for a truly idiomatic receptor language text. He will know he is successful if the receptor language readers do not recognize his work as a translation at all, but simply as a text written in the receptor language for their information and enjoyment.

ENGLISH You promised to come. He praised the canoe. He denied that he took it.

WAIWAI "I will certainly come," you said. "It's a wonderful canoe," he said. "I didn't take it," he said.

In Aguaruna the only way to express believe is with a quotation:

English: I believe you. Aguaruna: "It is true, I say to you."

EXERCISES - Kinds of Translations

A. In each of the following pairs of sentences, decide which is more idiomatic English, a or b? How would the meaning be expressed idiomatically in a second language which you speak?

1. (a) The storekeeper said that we will refund your money.

(b) The storekeeper promised to refund our money.

Some lexical combinations of the source language may be ambiguous. The meaning is not

clear. For example, "It is too hot to eat," could mean any of the following: The food is too hot to eat, the weather is too hot for us to feel like eating, the horse is too hot after running a race and doesn't want to eat. It would be hard to translate this sentence into another language and still have it mean all three. In the process of making an idiomatic translation, such ambiguities must often be resolved and only the intended meaning communicated. Conclusion

Translation is a complicated process. However, a translator who is concerned with transferring the meaning will find that the receptor language has a way in which the desired meaning can be expressed,

2. (a) A certain boy told me this little story at a party. (b) He is one boy. He told the one little story. This in a game he said,

3. (a) An International Alphabet would inevitably bring about a spelling reform as well. How many children have shed hot tears about spelling!

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(b) An International Alphabet would inevitably bring about a spelling reform, too. And how many hot children's tears have not been shed on spelling!

4. (a) He then reported his misfortune to the police, who are searching diligently for the thief (b) He then his mishap reported to the police, who are the thief intensively searching.

B. Look for literalisms in the following translations into English and underline the words or phrases that do not sound natural in English. Suggest a more idiomatic way of saying it. (All of these examples are from published translated material. References are not given so as not to embarrass the translator)

8. Villagers spend most of their energies in producing com and beans for their families. Those are the principle products, including coffee, greens and fruit. (Magazine of an airline) C. The following are sentences written by Sudanese who are not yet

fluent English speakers. The form used shows examples of how their mother tongue language structures have been carried over into English. The same information is then given in parenthesis in idiomatic English. What changes were made in correcting the English? These changes point out some of the differences between Sudanese languages and English. 1. Sir, the problems of before don't forget

(Sir, please don't forget the problems we discussed before.) 2. If there is any means, send me a letter to Riwoto.

(If there is any way to do so, send a letter to me at Riwoto.) 3. I will think you time to time day and day.

(I will be thinking about you often every day.) 4. I am very grateful to inform you with this letter.

(I am very happy to be able to send/write you this letter.) 5. I am a man who has been to Juba

for 15 years.

(I have now lived in Jube for 15 years.)

1. We offers as attractions horse trip or car by fields and forests.

(Tourist Brochure) 2. To move the cabin push button of wishing floor. If cabin

should enter more persons, each one should press number of

wishing floor. (Instructions in elevator/lift) 3. The archeological matters in Egypt indicated that the prin

cesses in those days had used natural cosmetic to polish their

beauty. (Newspaper) 4. Since 1976, the women has joined the popular army, and has

been permitted to join the armed forces and to acquire an equal military rank. Other laws have

extended the mother's leave before and after delivery, and granted the mother an additional

two-year leave to take care of her child under four years of

age. (Newspaper) 5. A hold-up (robbery) took place of a motorcycle rider at

Kampung carly yesterday morning. (Newspaper) 6. When you feel cold, because of the climate, or you feel

something had in your bones, please rub Param Kocok Super Kecil. Shake well the solution before itse. (Directions with

medicine) 7. Guatemala City is always full of surprises. It has a delicious

climate, for reasons of its altitude-1500 meters-but not so high as to affect people from low-lying areas. (Magazine of an airline)