SACRIFICING LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY ON THE ALTER OF COMPUTER AIDED TRANSLATION

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Language is a rare gift and attribute of man. No other living creatures are known to use language in the complex form man has put it into. What animals have is just some codes to express biological conditions like hunger, thirst, pains, and some emotions. Human language is so complex that man is capable of spontaneous linguistic response to any situation or stimulus, especially in his native language where he has the creative ability and intuition to utter expressions which may not have been said before, but which will be intelligible to the listener. However, such creative ability or intuition is hardly possible with the non native speaker. Therefore, in the job of translation, a fundamental problem arises since the translator can only reliably be a native speaker in one of the languages he handles. But we will not be as pessimistic as to say that all translations are corrupt products of the original *ab initio*. Indeed, a translated version of a text, if skilfully done, could present something fuller than the original, especially in the case of literary translation which we have described before as a type of rewriting.

However, the introduction of the computer into the job of translation since towards the end of the last century, has dramatically revolutionized and tremendously facilitated and promoted professionalism. It has also greatly facilitated foreign or second language learning because most of the soft wares available for the job also have audio versions which have been found to be very useful even to beginners. But to what extent can the computer or the stereotyped, packaged texts or linguistic expressions provide a substitution for the original reasoned language. This stereotype and absence of linguistic creativity is one of the main focuses of this paper.

PROGRAMMED TRANSLATION AND STEREOTYPE

The Thesaurus on line has the following entries for the term stereotype (noun): adage, banality, boiler plate, bromide, buzzword, chestnut, commonplace, familiar tune, prosaism, proverb, rubber stamp, shibboleth, slogan, stale saying, truism, vapid expression. Those are some of the most common synonyms of the word *stereotype* The antonyms must be “original”, “down to earth”, etc. For the purposes of this paper, the synonym *rubber stamp* is one of the most suitable. At the risk of sounding hyperbolic or alarmist, one could even mention copying, or photocopying, for programmed or computer aided translation. But that would undermine the tremendous input in terms of research and repeated crosschecks even before each programme or software is posted on the net. One must therefore posit at this level that in terms of the speed required to meet up with the volume of texts which have to be translated daily by government agencies and international bodies like the UNESCO, The African Union, the European Union, manual or unaided translation can no longer cope. On the other extreme, one can even say that in terms of production of texts and writing, originality ended with the period when Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans produced hand written manuscripts with ink and bird feathers. But what we are really missing here in terms of the stereotype of computer based production of translated material is the absence of individual style.

## CREATIVITY AND PERSONAL STYLE

Just as no two individuals will possess identical handwritings, so also it is quite impossible that two or three individuals will produce the same composition or write up on any subject, concrete or abstract. The exponents of computer translation, computer aided designs and computer prescription in Medicine, might argue that, just as we have seen above, that we can no longer afford to be manual, given the large numbers and volumes which professionals are now faced with in the twenty first century. The translator and linguist might argue particularly that what matters most is that the message of the original text is adequately rendered to ensure communication and comprehension. But the problem is far beyond mere surface communication which many of the computer translations produce. The very nature of semantics, shades of meaning and nuances that are attributable to a particular word or concept at any given time, requires that the consumer of the translated product will necessarily have to do some mental work to decipher the translator’s intention and arrive at the meaning that suits his own purposes. For instance for a word like “however” the translator might use the expression “all the same” (tout de même in French), “that not withstanding” (approximately malgré tout in French), or even “indeed” (en effet), depending on his thinking at the particular moment, or the amount of time available to him to think or reflect over the word and its proper context.

This type of rubber stamp which most programmed translations represent are usually tolerated because of their utilitarian value, without regard to style or even the proper use of language. The industrialist or the representative of a multinational organisation is anxious to get at the approximate equivalent of the text he gave he translator to work on. His major concern is the message he can work with, a message that would have been impossible without a translator. If for instance during a war, the commanding officer receives the following message: “attaque imminente, prière de reculer au moins cinq kilometres”; and the translator gives the following rendering: “imminent attack prayer to retreat at least five kilometres”. Of course such word for word renderings are quite a familiar occurrence in packaged translations. But this can still be very useful to the commander in the sense that the operational words are imminent attack and retreat. The soldier has no time for semantics or nuances or style. He is used to commands and short coded language. Hence we can conclude here that with the advent of the computer, translation has become more and more of a search for an approximate version of a message at the disposal of an industrialized society, than the art based and reflexion based research in the linguistic sciences and the use of language. However, just as many doctors and physicians are today nostalgic about their inability to be original and down to earth in their computer aided prescriptions, many linguists and well trained translators are usually not happy with the mass production of rubber stamps in the name of translation.

But all told, it would be a disaster for a literary translator, computer based or man base,to ignore man based, to ignore style and creativity, for literature cannot be so utilitarian as to ignore creativity, art and entertainment. In trying to establish the fact that a piece of literary translation being a version, the translator cannot undermine the socio-cultural content and context of the original work, we asserted as follows in our 8th NITI conference paper:

Therefore if the translator of a literary work has to take a look at the original work, transform, adapt and produce a version or even dub, then he is recreating and rewriting the same thing without losing sight of the original context and environment at any moment.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The following table shows some of the shortcomings and limitations we discovered on computer aided translation during a practical exercise.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1  | Original( English) | Translation (French) | Our Translation |
|  | I just wanted to crosscheck the modus operandi of the so called Google translate and ensure that the translation is actually reliable enough for a professional. That is all for now. | Je tenais tout simplement à contre vérifier le modus opérandi de la Google dite de traduire et de faire en sorte que la traduction est en fait assez fiable pour pour être un professionnel. C’est tout pour maintenant. | Je voulais tout simplement verifier le modus opérandi du soit disant Google Translate et m’assurer que la traduction est raisonablement fiable pour un professionel. C’est tout pour le moment. |
| 2 | Original (English) | Translation (German |  |
|  | Let me finish with the little translation before coming with you to the University | Bitte lassen Sie mich ausreden bis diese Übersetzung bevor er mit ihnen an die Universität. | Bitte lassen Sie mich diese kleine Übersetzung vertich machen bevor ich mit Ihnen an die Universität |
| 3 | Original (English) | Translation (German) |  |
|  | If I had known about your birthday, I would have at least sent you a card; but let me just for now wish you a very merry Christmas | Wenn ich über Ihren Geburstag gewusst, hätte ich, zumindest schickte man eine Karte, aber lassen Sie mich gerade Sie ein frohes Weihnachtsfest wünschen. | Only the use of the impersonal pronoun “man” (line 5) is queried. |
| 4 | Original (English) | Translation (German) |  |
|  | What do you think? | Was denken Sie? | Was meinen Sie? |

# CONSTRAINTS

Even though the focus of this paper is to highlight the stereotype and the lack of originality in the computer translation, it is certainly not without some worthwhile advantages, especially in our technology age, as we shall see later in this paper. But like in every technological application or technology based operation, there are bound to be constraints, especially in an environment where spare parts, maintenance culture, lack of know how, etc, usually pose problems. In Nigeria for example, the unreliable supply of electricity poses a very big problem. If PHCN takes light so often, which they must, for how long can one rely on the little amount of power stored into our system batteries? Yes, the translator resident in Zurich or Amsterdam may not experience this aspect of the constraints, but in Nigeria it is a problem for serious concern. Closely related to this is the absence of the server or signals. While preparing for this conference, I tried over a period of two full days to get the German version of a short, simple phrase from one of the on line translation outfits without success. The message I received repeatedly was the usual “Internet Explorer cannot display this web page”. I continued refreshing and trying all other avenues, but all in vain. However, this might have been a failure on the part of the service providers at the other end to provide the translation spontaneously. That is closely related to bad soft ware, which is common.

Some other problems which may not be environmental or localized are those of the laptop batteries which made international scandal in the recent past from some companies and manufacturers. Indeed, many of the brands like COMPAC still need to do something on the integrity of their batteries.

# ADVANTAGES OF COMPUTER AIDED TRANSLATION

In spite of the constraints and other problems bordering and creativity and personal style which we have highlighted above, there is no doubt that the computer has brought about a major breakthrough in the field of translation and language foreign learning. One of the personal gains I can boldly attribute to this conference is that it has opened a new gate for me in my German which has been rotting away for lack of use and practice for so many years now. Little did I know that I could build up an infinite number of in terms of vocabulary and structure which even ten workshops can provide, having had the basics in grammar and pronunciation. But even then, most of the translations provided by some online service providers are available in audio for immediate listening. So, most of the packages can serve as very useful safety valves, crosschecks and reliable base for self improvement for those who have acquired the basic skills in a particular foreign language.

And the latest soft wares have scores of European and Indo-Chinese languages in their packages. There is no doubt that a lot of effort and group work went into these packages before they were put in the market. One must appreciate the technological breakthrough, especially in the simultaneous translation, in the Google Chrome which sometimes goes even “faster” than producer of the source language. Finally in terms of quantitative output and speed, we cannot compare human efforts to that of the computer in this regard. And in most cases, as we said above, the communication goes through and is received.

# SOME ONLINE AND SOFT WARE SERVICE PROVIDERS

The following can easily be accessed through GOOGLE:

1. e FREE TRANSLATOR.com
2. Instant Translation
3. FREE TRANSLATION.COM
4. Google Translate
5. E French Translation
6. LOGOS Multilingual Translation Portal
7. Books for Translation

# CONCLUSION

In full glare of the postmodernist wind blowing across the world of art, architecture, literature and most of the humanities, those of us who grew up in the classical period of playing the art game by certain rigorous rules, usually find ourselves in serious nostalgia of the good old days of clichés like le style c’est l’homme (Martinet), your punctuation is woeful, write with more care and pain, poor paragraphing, etc Nowadays, with the post realist and postmodernist fever, who really cares about spelling. New grammars, new spellings, new brand of English, all in the name of freedom. But apart from literary works, which we feel must go with the mood, style and cultural environment of the original text, the new freedom in the area of computer driven translation, is well worth the while. That is the only way we can cope with enormous volume of texts which have to be rendered in other languages for the African Union, NATO, the UNO, ECOWA, the Arab League, etc, on a daily basis. As we said earlier, it is alright, as long as the objective is COMMUNICATION between different groups or individuals of different linguistic backgrounds.

1. S.E Osazuwa, Literary translation as rewriting, paper delivered at the 8th NITI conference, Abuja, 7– 8 August 2008, pp 4-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)