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CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES AND LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES IN
TRANSLATION

Jizzakh branch of the National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek

The faculty of Psychology, department of Foreign languages

Phylogology and foreign languages

Supervisor: **Abduraxmanova Zilola Yoqubjon qizi**

Student of group 301-21: **Mallaboyeva Odina Akmal qizi**

Annotation: This article explores the "lingua-cultural" problems of translation, highlighting the challenges translators face when attempting to convey not only the linguistic meaning but also the cultural context embedded in language. Key topics discussed include the difficulties of translating idiomatic expressions, cultural references, untranslatable words, conceptual differences between cultures, and the impact of language structure on meaning. The article emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding in the translation process, noting that successful translation goes beyond a literal word-for-word approach. The conclusion underscores the ongoing relevance of human translators in overcoming these challenges, as they bridge cultural gaps and ensure effective communication across languages.

Key words: lingua-cultural problems, translation challenges, cultural references, idiomatic expressions, untranslatable words, conceptual differences, cultural sensitivity, language structure, localization, globalization, cross-cultural communication, human translators, cultural context, translation accuracy, target audience, translation process, language and culture, communication barriers, cultural nuances.

Translation is a complex process that transcends the mere conversion of words from one language to another. One of the major challenges faced by translators is not only to translate the linguistic structures of a language but also to convey the cultural nuances embedded in a particular language. These "lingua-cultural" problems refer to the difficulties that arise when the culture-specific elements of one language cannot be directly mapped onto the culture of another. This issue is often central to achieving an accurate and meaningful translation.

Cultural References and Idiomatic Expressions

Languages are deeply rooted in the cultures from which they arise, often carrying references to history, religion, literature, social norms, and everyday practices. These references can be difficult for translators to handle, especially when the target language or



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culture does not share similar historical or social contexts. For example, an idiom like "kick the bucket" in English, which means "to die," might not have an equivalent expression in another language. The direct translation of the phrase would likely confuse the target audience, as the idiomatic meaning is not universally understood. A translator may need to find an idiom in the target language that conveys the same meaning or may opt for an explanatory translation. Cultural references also extend to specific concepts like holidays, food, or customs. A translator working with a novel set in Japan may encounter terms related to traditional festivals like "Tanabata" or foods such as "sushi." Without an equivalent cultural reference in the target language, the translator faces the challenge of how to either substitute with a similar concept or explain the term in a way that makes sense to the reader.

Conceptual Differences in Cultures

Each culture has its own way of categorizing and perceiving the world. For instance, the concepts of time, space, and politeness can vary significantly across cultures, and these differences are often embedded in language. In languages like Japanese or Korean, for example, the structure of a sentence can change depending on the formality level, social status, or even the relationship between the speakers. A literal translation of a Japanese sentence may not convey the same degree of respect or formality that the original language does because the target language may lack the same system of politeness markers. Similarly, certain moral or ethical values can be perceived differently depending on cultural context. What may be considered a joke in one culture could be deeply offensive in another. The challenge for the translator, therefore, is to navigate these cultural boundaries without distorting the meaning or losing the emotional and intellectual content of the original.

Untranslatable Words and Phrases

Many languages have words that encapsulate a specific cultural concept or experience but have no direct equivalent in other languages. These untranslatable words pose a significant challenge for translators. For example, the German word "Schadenfreude" refers to the feeling of pleasure derived from another person's misfortune, a concept that does not have an exact counterpart in English. Similarly, the Portuguese term "saudade" refers to a deep emotional state of longing or nostalgia, often for something or someone absent, and has no single-word equivalent in many languages. When faced with such terms, translators may either borrow the word directly from the source language (as in "saudade") or provide a descriptive translation. However, both approaches present difficulties in conveying the full emotional weight or cultural significance of the term.

Cultural Sensitivities and Taboo Topics

Some topics may be approached very differently depending on the culture involved. Subjects related to politics, religion, gender, or sexuality, for example, can be handled in a variety of ways in different cultures. What is acceptable in one society may be considered taboo or offensive in another. For instance, in some cultures, discussions about personal emotions and mental health are considered private and often avoided in public life. In others, such topics may be discussed more openly. When translating works that deal with these



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sensitive issues, the translator must be careful not to inadvertently offend the target audience. This might involve modifying the content to fit cultural norms or, in the case of more sensitive or controversial subjects, offering a culturally appropriate equivalent.

The Impact of Language Structure on Meaning

Languages differ not only in vocabulary but also in their syntactic and grammatical structures. These differences can create challenges for the translator who must balance both linguistic accuracy and cultural nuances. For instance, the word order, verb tenses, and the use of articles in a sentence can change the way information is presented in the target language. Languages like Chinese or Japanese often omit subjects from sentences if they are understood from the context, while English requires explicit subject-pronoun constructions. A literal translation from one of these languages to English could sound awkward, as the subject might be left unspoken or implied. Furthermore, the gendered nature of some languages, such as Spanish, French, or Arabic, can create challenges in translating gender-neutral terms or pronouns. For example, using the English singular "they" in languages where grammatical gender is important requires careful consideration.

Conclusion

Lingua-cultural problems in translation are both a challenge and an opportunity. The key to overcoming these difficulties lies in the translator's ability to not only understand the language but also the cultural nuances that shape it. Translation is not simply about finding equivalent words; it is about conveying meaning, emotion, and context. As such, translators must possess cultural sensitivity, creativity, and a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures. This dual expertise helps bridge the gap between languages, ensuring that the message resonates with readers in a way that feels authentic and culturally relevant. In light of the challenges posed by lingua-cultural problems, it is evident that translation is far from a mechanical task. It is an intricate dance between language and culture, requiring a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures to ensure that the intended meaning is preserved without distortion. While technology, such as machine translation, continues to improve, it often struggles to navigate the subtle cultural nuances that humans instinctively grasp. Therefore, skilled human translators remain invaluable, as they not only translate words but also interpret the deeper cultural context behind them. This ability to bridge cultures and ensure that communication remains effective, respectful, and true to the original message is what makes translation both an art and a science. As global interactions continue to grow, the role of the translator will only become more essential in fostering cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, making the study of lingua-cultural problems a vital area of expertise in our increasingly interconnected world.

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