

The importance of translating messages



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One of the main concerns of translation studies is the problem of accuracy: how much freedom the translator is allowed when interpreting a text from one language into another; whether he/she has to concentrate on the content or on the “ atmosphere” of the piece of literature. In this paper, by comparing and contrasting the theory of Noam Chomsky (as presented in *Syntactic Structures*, 1957) and the one emerging from it by Eugene A. Nida (in *Toward a Science of Translating*, 1964), the *core message* of a text will be proven to be one the most important features.

First of all, according to Edwin Gentzler (1993), despite the fact that Chomsky’s work was not specifically meant to be a part of translation studies, Nida adopted several aspects of it into his own, as, in the words of Gentzler (1993), “ Chomsky was literally a Godsend for Nida” (p. 46) – “ literally”, because the main field of Nida’s research involved the translation of the Bible. To get a clearer impression about their theories, it is essential to become familiar with them.

As Gentzler (1993) points out, Noam Chomsky was more interested in the rules and structures of grammar than deep structures. His “ theory involves three levels of conceptualization: (1) a base component made up of ‘ phrase structure rules’ that generate (2) a deep structure, which in turn is changed, via transformational rules into (3) a surface structure” (Gentzler, 1993: 46). This concept was significantly altered in Nida’s adaptation.

As Snell-Hornby (1988) describes him, “ in the United States the most influential scholar was undoubtedly Eugene A. Nida” (p. 14) who was originally engaged in the invention of a methodology for Bible translations in

order to help missionaries deliver the core message of the book. According to Gentzler (1993), he was appalled by nineteenth-century tendencies of preferring literal translation to the meaning. As cited in Gentzler (1993), he claimed that “ the words [of the American Standard Version of the Bible] may be English, but the grammar is not; and the sense is quite lacking” (p. 45). To solve the problem, he took Chomsky’s theory and, to make it fit into his own invention, simplified it by omitting the first component. In this way, he created a system from generative grammar exclusively for translation practice, and it became quite popular.

As Gentzler (1993) points out, both Chomsky’s and Nida’s model agree on a “ deep, coherent, and unified entity” which is the same in every language, and only changes in the surface structure, i. e. when presented in different languages (p. 46). However, the two theories take disparate ways in analysing the “ core”: Chomsky is more concerned about “ universal rules of grammar and universal lexical forms”, whereas Nida tends to discover “ an original divine message” (Gentzler, 1993: 47). Despite the religious undertone, Nida’s viewpoint seems more relevant for translation studies than Chomsky’s: it is the exact interpretation of the message that should be considered as priority, not the pursuit of creating sentences in the target language grammatically as close as possible to the ones in the original text – but then again, Chomsky’s model has not been developed for the field Nida uses it.

Actually, as mentioned by Gentzler (1993), Nida ventures further into the matter, and states that “ the core message” is so important that it must be delivered in any case – even by sacrificing the original sentences to bend

them to the needs of the cultural peculiarities of the target language. For instance, he translates the phrase “Lamb of God” as “Seal of God” for Eskimo language, since for the Eskimos, the seal is the animal equivalent of the lamb in regards of sacrifice (Snell-Hornby, 1988: 19). It is one of his “techniques of adjustment” (Chesterman, 2005: 20). For him, it is not the sign that matters, but “the response to the sign” (Gentzler, 1993: 53), because as long as it makes people behave the way God wants them to, his interpretation is correct, regardless the changes in the text. He calls this kind of translation “faithful”, which is somewhat ironical, since the word has “traditionally [...] been reserved for literal translations” (Gentzler, 1993: 58). However, since he privileges the meaning above the form, it fits into his theory quite well.

Gentzler (1993) mentions another difference between Chomsky’s and Nida’s model: the methodology. Although Chomsky agrees with the crucial role of the “core” or deep structure, it is antithetic to his views to execute such practices that Nida does who demolishes the sentences into deep structure, carries it into the target language, and then finally, uses it to rebuild the sentences in the target language. It is true that in regards of the method described above, Nida clearly diverges from Chomsky, but translation-wise, it seems rather efficient (like the example with the Eskimos).

There is one aspect in which Gentzler (1993) clearly disagrees with Nida: he claims that Nida’s advices for translators to agree with or even “admire” the original author of the text is a considerably dangerous one, because they could fall prey to the so-called “intentional fallacy” (p. 57). Unfortunately, his fears seem valid: however beneficiary it is to understand the tiniest

subtleties of the writer as a translator, one should rather not let his/her very self and opinions flow excessively into the work of another person, since he/she is only a chain which connects the original text and the translation. Too much self-identification may result in the alteration of the core message.

In conclusion, it can be clearly seen that, according to the theory of Eugene A. Nida, in order to present a text to a language whose speakers live in a completely different culture than the speakers of the source language, a translator is permitted to take liberations when interpreting the sentences. Naturally, the occasions at which the cultural gap between the nations is so vast that between English and Eskimo occur quite rarely, but the subtleties are always present when a text is translated from one language to another – and even one mistranslated word can cause tragedies.

References:

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