

Translation as Problem-solving: The case for Ndebele

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It is our firm conviction that translation is 'a house of many rooms,' and that these different rooms are often simply different discourses and perspectives on a common object of interest – translation (Neubert & Shreve 1992)

Introduction

From the quotation, we note that translation is multifaceted and we may add also that it is multidisciplinary. Theories and practices of translation litter many books. For this talk, I discuss translation in Ndebele as a problem solving matter. One may ask: what problem? It is the problem of communication. It is my humble submission that translation should be a goal-oriented process. However, translation activities in Ndebele seem to be motivated by reasons other than communicative needs of the readers/speakers of Ndebele.

Not much has been written on translation and/or interpretation activities in the Ndebele language although much of this is happening in the language. For that reason I rely for my information on what I have encountered, observed or participated in. I have also talked to undergraduate students who have commented on Ndebele-English translations or vice versa, including my own translations. I have realized that there is rarely a consensus on any translation. Well, if we extend further our aforementioned metaphor that 'translation is a house of many rooms' we may as well note that there could be several different translation versions of the same work. Maybe, at this point we may need to refresh our memories on the trends in translation studies in general and in African languages in particular before grounding on Ndebele.

Some Reasons for Researching Translation in Ndebele

Let me start by outlining some of my experiences and encounters that have motivated this presentation. These encounters may assist in illustrating general assumptions and attitudes towards the practice of translations. For example:

- phone calls people asking for the Ndebele equivalent of a certain English word or vice versa. – e.g. 'uyadela' from the jingle 'uyadela wena othand' ukulinyelwa'

- colleagues asking whether a certain expression would be appropriate e.g democracy as *intando kazulu* – what then of anarchism *umbuso wentando kazulu* is it democratic rule or republic as opposed to monarch, or how would you put this in Ndebele – male prostitute
- an overseas student translating Ndebele works into English then Czech sends through email words and wants their meaning and English versions: *Mahlabezulu, Mthwakazi, Isilo sakoMabindela*

These cases and many others too many to list do reflect general perceptions on translation. One perception is that translation is at the level of words. What one needs is the English equivalent of the Ndebele word. The other impression I get is that it should be easy for me as a mother tongue speaker and teacher of Ndebele to translate anything in my language. Translation ability is equated to the ability to speak and write at least two languages. In most cases, when I request for more time to research and verify the facts people get frustrated and impatient.

Let me state also that I have been asked to translate from English into Ndebele a book written by a non-English speaker. The book is on the Ndebele people, culture and literature and is based on works written in Ndebele by Ndebele authors. Actually, I have been asked to translate back to Ndebele.

Maybe we should briefly outline the major trends in translation studies in general.

Summary of trends in translation studies

The focus of translation studies is familiar to most of us: Issues of concern have been Source Language (SL) versus Target Language (TL). This in turn, leading to debates on translation equivalence and cases of untranslatability. Also of concern to translation theorists are questions of loss and gain and whether the primary concern should be the process or the product of translation.

Most theories of translation center around answering or attempting to answer the above questions, for example, J.C. Catford (1965) and Nida's dynamic equivalence. Later other

theories that came into the scene include the Relevance theories, deconstructionists like James Holmes and feminist translation theories. But most significantly is the influence of cultural studies in translation that state that translation should go beyond the text (Snell-Horby 1988, Susan Bassnett & Andre Levefre 1990).

The unresolved debate on how faithful the TL text should be in its resemblance to the SL text has been overtaken by the debate on the ‘manipulation’ of the text and issues of the visibility or invisibility of the translator.

It is significant to note the multidisciplinary nature of translation involving literary studies, psychology, history, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, corpus linguistics, gender studies and cultural studies. Different theories therefore partly stem from the divergent disciplines contributing to translation studies.

The state of translation in Zimbabwe

The practice of translation in the Ndebele language cannot be studied in isolation. It should be viewed within the socio-economic and ideological conditions that shape it. We should therefore take into consideration the translation practice in Zimbabwe.

Chimhundu laments the poor state of translation in African countries in general and in Zimbabwe in particular:

In the developed world, language is business, and translation and interpreting have become professions. However, in most developing countries, and particularly in Africa, both academics and policy makers appear to be neglecting many important and development-oriented language issues such as professional translation and translator training... (Chimhundu 1991:34)

He further states:

In Zimbabwe, as in most other African countries, where translation is not regarded as either a profession or a discipline, practical-oriented planning and communication is done in the language of a former imperial power (Chimhundu 1991:38).

Similar views are expressed on the situation in neighboring Mozambique by Juliet Langa:

Mozambique, like many other countries, is undertaking development projects which are basically conceived and planned in Portuguese (J. Langa 1991:45)

She further says: The mass media translators and the people responsible for education/instruction of the populations working for development projects in Maputo, are mostly people who have had no training in communication and translation....(J. Langa 1991:48).

We note from Chimhundu's observation in Zimbabwe substantiated by Langa in Mozambique that translation in most African countries is not yet a professional task. Some of the reasons being lack of training for professional translators and interpreters as well as the continued use of Languages of Wider Communication, i.e. English, Portuguese, French, Spanish, etc.

It is interesting to note that although a lot of translation is carried out at the University of Zimbabwe, the University is yet to recognize translation as an academic activity like any other. I have experienced cases where translation works have been dismissed and denied recognition as academic work. However, the translators concerned are not protesting to the system perhaps because they feel compensated by the hefty payments they would have received from the NGOs for the consultancy services.

Translation in the Ndebele language

The situation in Ndebele is not different from that of other African languages in general as described by Chimhundu and Langa. Ndebele is playing second fiddle to English. Therefore, most translations are from English to Ndebele mainly, and rarely to or from other African languages. What is also of interest is that the flow of translation is one way, from English to Ndebele and rarely conversely.

This situation creates a different situation from that which pertains in the developed countries where translation is usually a two-way process, for example, from German to French and vice versa. It is in these situations where maybe the notions of equivalence and other related concepts are most relevant.

Translation studies have of late incorporated aspects outside the text but crucial for the understanding of the text. According to Praz “all texts are translations of translations and the lines cannot be drawn to separate Reader from Translator” (B-McGuire 1980:79).

This view places translations within certain context which could be historical era, literary tradition and the like. It also sees a reader as an active producer/translator of a text rather than a passive receiver of information from a text. According to this view, ‘the translator first reads/translates in the SL and then, through a further process of decoding, translates the text into the TL language’ B-McGuire 1980:80). The translator is interpreting the SL to readers of the TL text who have no knowledge of SL or its literary culture.

Actually, every text is in one way or another linked or related to other texts produced before it or at the same period. According to Robert Scholes (1974:10):

Every literary unit from the individual sentence to the whole order of words can be seen in relation to the concept of system. In particular, we can look at individual works, literary genres, and the whole of literature as related systems, and at literature as a system within the larger system of human culture.

Therefore, translation is not merely rendering SL text into TL text. The text is just part of a system and that system should be comprehended as a whole first. The translation activities in Ndebele lack this aspect. Why is this so? First, the translations are not meant to fill a gap in the knowledge as perceived by the speakers of the language. Translations are usually sponsored by external groups for the purposes of passing knowledge that the external groups feel should be known to Ndebele. These could be governmental or non-governmental bodies. Second, translations are made mainly to fulfill policy requirements, i.e. having certain documents like company code of conduct rules in the three languages Ndebele, Shona and English. These are translations guided not by the real needs of speakers but by policy. Thirdly, translations are done with no prior research on the needs of the speakers and are therefore done for an unknown quantity of consumers.

What is perceived as problems in translation in Ndebele are not actual problems with type of text and issues of loss and gain or equivalence, but broader socio-linguistics problems some of which solutions lie beyond the linguistic domain.

Let us use an extract to illustrate some of the problems:

English text (original)

Four main factors make the public sector highly vulnerable. These are deployment system (dualisation of homes), mobility, poverty (or relative poverty) and type of service. The deployment system has not been sensitive to the family resulting in families being split up for long periods. Some services require that staff be regularly on the move. These include staff in road construction departments, parks and wildlife etc. The employees often receive substantial travel and subsistence allowances, making them relatively wealthy in the midst of poverty, especially in rural areas. Young pension clerks have been cited as being highly vulnerable as they attend to desperate clients such as young *widows*. The clerks are not only seduced by the widows for fast tracking pension claims, but are themselves also attracted by the pension benefits of these women. Customs and immigration officials at border posts are at high risk because they are often without their families, have access to money through bribes and are targets for sexual persuasion by cross border traders as they try to avoid paying duty.

Ndebele text (translation)

Zine izinto ezenza izisebenzi zikahulumende zibesengozini yesifo. Kuqala ngomkhuba wokuthumela abantu ukuyasebenza kude lemuli zabo, ukuhamba yonke indawo, ubuyanga lokuthi umuntu wenza msebenzi bani. Ukuthumela abantu emisebenzini ekude lemizi yabo kubangele ukwehlukana kwemuli okwezikhathi ezinde. Eminye njalo imisebenzi yenza izisebenzi zihlale zingezihambileyo. Lapha kubaliswe izisebenzi ezakha imigwaqo, ezemaphaga labalondoloza izinyamazane, njll. Lezizisebenzi zande ukuthola imali yokusebenzisa lokudla ethe xaxa okusuke kubenze babengomaqhuzu emaphandleni lapho okulubuyanga obukhulu. Omabhalane bamapentsheni abasebatsha kuthiwa basenkingeni yezilingo ngoba basebenza abafelokazi abasesebatsha. Omabhalane laba kabalingwa kuphela yilababafelokazi abafuna ukuthi amapentsheni abo aphume masinyane kodwa labo omabhalane basuke bahugwe ngumhawu wemali yepentsheni yalababafelokazi. Izisebenzi zemithelo labangena elizweni – *customs and immigration* – emingceleni yelizwe zisengozini ngoba esikhathini esinengi zitshiye izimuli kude njalo zilemali enengi eziyithola njengesivalamlomo kanti ngapha labathengisa bechapha imingcele babalinga ngamacansi ukuze bangatheli imfanelo.

Some terms that I have found interesting include *freedom of expression, democracy, ikhelicingo*.

Interpreting in Ndebele

Interpreting in law courts is one area that has been studied widely on problems of translation. This is an interesting area because any mistranslation would lead to

miscarriage of justice. I will cite two studies in Ndebele that have looked into court interpretation in Ndebele. One study was done by Nozizwe Dlamini for her BA Honours dissertation and another by this research on legal terminology in Ndebele. Here are some examples from law court interpretations:

Court observation 1.

The magistrate said, ‘There is nothing further I can say as the case is ‘res ipsa loquitar’

Court interpreter, ‘Akusekho okunye engingakutsho ngoba isilonda sokutsha lesi sitshengisa ukuba yinto eyenziwe ngokungananzi langabomo. Lokhu kusenza sicabangele ukunganaki kwakho umntwana.’(There is nothing further I can say as the case is clear from the wound from the burns that it was deliberate act of negligence. This makes us presume that you do not care for the child).

Court observation 2.

In another court case the accused was asked whether he had any excuse for stealing.

The court interpreter asked the accused saying, ‘Wawulemvumo Yokuntshontsha na?’(Did you have any permission to steal?).

Court observation 3.

A court interpreter translated the statement, ‘In the best interest of the child...’ as ‘Lokho okulungele umntwana...’ (That which is good for the child...)[Dlamini 2001:21-29].

The court interpreters translate and explain the legal jargon in Ndebele. In court observation 1, the magistrate used the Latin expression ‘res ipsa loquitar’ which it would seem is an expression that court interpreters are familiar with. Then in court observation 2, the court interpreter mistranslates ‘excuse’ as ‘permission’, therefore, giving misleading information to the accused. Similarly, in court observation 3, ‘in the best interest’ is not the same as ‘that which is good’. What we can establish in these court observations is that due to lack of legal language in Ndebele, the court translations are simply explanations. In the process of explaining, court interpreters make mistakes. The translations are likely to vary from interpreter to interpreter or even the same interpreter might interpret the same word differently.

Improperly translated terms

There are some Ndebele legal terms that are an improper translation from the English terms. Two such terms are discussed here:

suspect – *ocatshangelwayo* (the suspected one), *owethwesa icala* (the accused one), *isibotshwa esingakagwetshwa* (a prisoner who has not been sentenced)

accused – *isibotshwa* (the prisoner).

The translation of both suspect and accused as prisoner is misleading. However, in ordinary Ndebele talk, once you appear in court they say **ubotshiwe** (you have been arrested) and then that derives the noun **isibotshwa** (prisoner). But legal language as technical language should delineate the concepts appropriately and differentiate **isibotshwa** (prisoner) from **ocatshangelwayo** (suspect) and **umangalelwa**¹ (accused).

The damage to the justice system is frightening if these instances of mistranslations were to be assumed to be common in the law courts. What makes the court situation look unique as far as translation is concerned is the atmosphere that in most cases is intimidating to the accused and the witnesses.

According to Kaschula (1995:13):

The courtroom is often a confusing and hostile environment for the accused or the witness, both from a linguistic as well as a cultural point of view. The interpreter then presents the only key to the understanding of courtroom procedure as well as the language being used. The interpreter is probably the most important participant in any particular case involving a cross-cultural or multilingual interaction.

Kaschula cites a case in South African court where proceedings in English were interpreted into Xhosa. He notes the problem caused by the concept of *ukukhulisa* and *ukondla* and the English *fostering*, *adoption* and *maintenance*. For instance, how would one explain the payment of *isondlo/chiredzwa* in English? What is at play here is more than linguistic systems but cultures. We shall discuss the cultural dimension later, for now, it suffices to say translation is more than word-level or sentence-level equivalences. This leads to the issue of whether emphasis should be on the process of translation or the final product of translation.

Translation as process and product

Whether one views translation as a process or as a product is a matter of choice, what is finally judged and evaluated is the impact of that translation. Let us make reference to features of translation as proposed by Beaugrande and we can assess whether or not it is wise to separate the process from the product.

The following are the features or guidelines on translations as proposed by Beaugrande, (1978:13):

- The text, and not the individual word or the single sentence, is the relevant unit for translating
- Translating should be studied not only in terms of the similarities and differences between a source and a target text, but also as a process of interaction between author, translator, and reader of the translation
- The interesting factors are not text features in themselves, but underlying strategies of language use as manifested in text features
- These strategies must be seen in relation to the context of communication (cited in Hatim 2001:32)

The context of communication in translation can better be understood when we incorporate ideas from cultural studies.

Cultural Studies in Translation

It is obvious from the above features that the cultural dimension in translation should be taken into account as well. In translation ‘there is simultaneously a shift from one linguistic system to another, from one socio-cultural system to another, and from one literary or poetic system to another (Hatim 2001:59). The socio-cultural dimension is of immediate interest to us. It comments on the limitations of the focus of translation on the text (see Susan Bassnet & Andre Lefevere 1990b, Snell-Hornby 1988). In her intergrated approach, Snell Hornby advises linguists ‘to make a leap from the text as the unit of translation to culture at large’ (Hatim 2001:61)

The main concern here is cultural rather than linguistic transfer and the priority shifts to the function of the TL text rather than the SL text. From this angle translation is seen in the larger context of addressing the ‘problem of ideology, change and power in literature and society (Susan Bassnet & Andre Lefevere 1990b:4). Translation matters cease to be seen from a narrow formalist model to ‘larger issues of context and history’ (Hatim 2001:62) For that reason, ‘the linguistic approach is certainly not sufficient by itself, and the study of translation should therefore be channeled to move beyond it Hatim 2001:63).

Maybe, we may revisit our examples from law courts in Zimbabwe. The interpreters who mistranslate are actually being subjected to impossible situations. They are supposed to interpret legal language yet in actual fact they are trying to transfer a particular legal culture to a different people with a different legal culture. Translation is meaningful, in my opinion, if it is targeted towards solving a problem. Different translation strategies could then be devised for the different translation problems.

Translation as Problem-solving activity

Translation in Ndebele will remain a sponsored non-targeted activity with no value to language users unless it is re-oriented for problem solving. While the problems of the Ndebele are not necessarily peculiar, the need for translation must come from proper identification of communicative needs. The concern about the status of translation as a profession or translation studies as a discipline are genuine concerns but as long as the translation business is continues in the present manner, it would not change the situation.

The problems of translation are not just problems of equivalence or cultural difference or even lack of professionally trained translators. The underlying problem is the purposeful function of translation. Relevant theories and practices of translation will inevitably emerge as purposeful translation is done. The current practice of looking for a Ndebele equivalent of an English text stifles the growth and nurturing of translation as a field in Ndebele. Currently, there is no standard approach or any discernible trend in translation in Ndebele, making students of translation more confused after the translation course than before.

If we draw from the Skopos Theory (by Vermeer 1989) that ‘the target text must be produced with a given purpose in mind and that translations function well when shaped by a particular purpose’(Hatim 2001:74), we therefore note the significance of the target-oriented and problem-solving approach to translation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, may I cite Candlin who states that,

Translation is characteristically purposeful as a profession; it has targets and goals. It is done on behalf of sponsors. It lacks (except in rare cases) the leisure of reflective consideration about the researchable questions of why like this, why here’ (Christopher Candlin 1991).

Notwithstanding the lack of reflection that is characteristic of many translation works, those engaged in translation in Ndebele cannot afford the luxury of reluctance to reflect on their work. The one crucial step, in my opinion, is having translators acknowledged for their work in the form of including in the cover page the translator(s). Should translators put value (i.e. not just monetary) in their products, then each translator will create a corpus of the translation works s/he would have done. It would then be easy for students of translation in Ndebele to study the practice(s) of translation in Ndebele as well as the style of individual translators.

But most importantly, translation in Ndebele should be problem-solving first and foremost, for it to be purposeful and relevant. Otherwise, the current practice will continue where organizations churn out millions of dollars in the reproduction of material that never achieve its stated goals.

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