



Some Non-Linguistic Obstacles in English-Vietnamese Translation

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ABSTRACT

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This paper addresses some non-linguistic hindrances in English-Vietnamese translation, which are ethical and ideologic obstacles, barriers in censorship and cultural hinderances, to raise the awareness about potential difficulties in translation and illustrate some ways to overcome these challenges made by some translators. The findings of the study shows that influences from morality, ideology and cultural values may hinder translators from rendering English text into Vietnamese and it is necessary for translators to be highly aware of these non-linguistic obstacles to make good translations which would not cause confusion or misunderstanding, or be criticized by readers or social activists. Additionally, the paper also proves that an English sentence may have different Vietnamese translations because text-based equivalence is not only determined by linguistic factors but also by people, acting and interacting in a social context, and euphemistic expressions can be used when there is a conflict between translator's and author's ideology or when it is censored but such expressions should not cause confusion or misunderstanding. In-depth cultural knowledge of the source language and the target language is also required for the reason that it could be a helpful tool for translators in reserving integrity of the source language and naturalness of the target language.

Keywords:

non-linguistic obstacles, English-Vietnamese translation, difficulties in translation, Ethics and Ideology in translation

I. INTRODUCTION

Equivalence and non-equivalence in translation has been widely addressed by many scholars like Nida (1964), Newmark (1981) (Munday, 2016) since “*translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes*” (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 124) and “*equivalence can be established on any linguistic level*” (Pym, 2014, p. 34). Nevertheless, outside of linguistic realm, particularly linguistic non-equivalence, there are many conflicts hindering translators from producing good translation. It may be a serious conflict between a translator's personal ethics and his professional ethics that causes the translator to render curses like *You're a fool* as *Ba tôi sẽ không chấp nhận yêu cầu của anh đâu* (suggested English translation¹: *My father won't accept your offer*), a clash between professional ethics and censorship that puts translators into a dilemma of reserving the integrity of the source language (abbreviated to SL) or losing some

emotional nuances of SL to bypass censorship, or, ideological conflicts between translators and the author of SL. Additionally, according to Brown's statement (2007), language and culture are inseparable if one wants to reserve the significance of either language or culture. Accordingly, cultural differences are expected to pose hindrances for translators when rendering English text into Vietnamese. Therefore, this paper aims to address some non-linguistic hindrances in English-Vietnamese translation, which are ethical and ideologic obstacles, barriers in censorship and cultural hinderances, to raise the awareness about potential difficulties in translation and illustrate some ways to overcome these challenges made by some translators.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges in English-Vietnamese translation has been widely addressed by many scholars like Pham C. T. (2018), Pham & Truong (2019), Phan, Nguyen, Ly, & Nguyen (2021), Nguyen (2022). These scholars's studies, however, mainly focus on linguistic challenges, including *Collocation, Prepositions, Tenses, Passive voice, Countable and*

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¹ “Suggested English translation” here also includes back-translations of the Vietnamese translations illustrated in this

paper and the symbol “≈” is used to represent the phrase “suggested English translation”.

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uncountable nouns, and *Culture-specific words*. On the one hand, it seems that non-linguistic obstacles do not attract Vietnamese scholars' since related studies by Vietnamese researchers are scanty. On the other hand, non-linguistic challenges, to a certain extent, also hinder translators from appropriately rendering English text to Vietnamese or vice versa. Hence, this paper aims to examine some non-linguistic factors and their potential impacts on translation.

III. METHODOLOGY

Used in this study are the research methods usually called quantitative method and contrastive analysis which are believed to be helpful tools for researchers to make clearer descriptions of language. Additionally, skopos theory by Nord (1991) as presented by Robinson (2012), the theory about translation as rewriting by Lefevere (1992) as presented by Munday (2016) and cultural values claimed by Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy (2017), are also applied in this paper for the analyses of Vietnamese translations of some English instances from the two movies, *We're the Millers* and *Sex Education* and from the novel named *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (abbreviated to *Harry Potter*). These Vietnamese translations are collected from the Vietnamese subtitles (of the two movies) on Netflix streaming platform and from the Vietnamese version of the novel *Harry Potter* translated by Ly Lan. Analyses are conducted to show the influences of some non-linguistics factors like morality, ideology and culture on translation and to illustrate some ways to deal with obstacles caused by these factors made by the translators of the aforementioned movies and novel.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Morality, ideology, censorship and cultural values are found to have influence on the Vietnamese translations and the influence of each will be addressed in the followings:

First, morality itself is complicated and it is uneasy to determine what is ethical. For example, in a negotiation, a man called his partner a fool, which was then translated by the man's daughter into "My father won't accept your offer", which was judged to be unethical by Kantian principles for its bending truth while utilitarianism followers would approve the translation on the basis of considering the best results for all participants (Baker, 2018, p. 314). Such translations are also approved by functional theorists emphasizing the greatest influence of *communicative situation* where the source text and target text (abbreviated to TT) serve to convey a message, meaning that whether *text-based equivalence* is the defining standard of a good translation is determined by "people, acting and interacting in a social context" as statement by Nord (1991, as cited by Robinson, 2012, p.156). Accordingly, a sentence can be translated diversely according to various contexts. For instance, the sentence "I'm fucked" was translated into "Tôi

khánh kiệt" (≈ "I'm flat broke") and "Chú tiêu đời" (≈ I'm fucked) in two different contexts in the Vietnamese subtitle of the movie *We're the Millers* streamed on Netflix². In the first context, the speaker was explaining to his creditor about his inability in paying back his debt: "I got robbed, Brad. They took everything I had [...] 22 grand of my money that I'd saved. I'm fucked". Apparently, the translation "Tôi khánh kiệt" fits the context and delivers a more accessible expression to audiences than the literal translation "Tôi tiêu đời rồi". In the second context, the speaker asked his friend to do him a favor because he was struggling to find a female partner for his mission: "Unless you can think of someone that can leave town tomorrow, I'm fucked". In this context, the translation "Chú tiêu đời" (I'm fucked) is undeniably far better than "Tôi khánh kiệt" (I'm flat broke). This proves that translators' morality and communicative situations have an undeniable influence on translation and translators should be aware of the influence to deliver a more appropriate translation to readers.

Second, Lefevere (1992, as cited by Munday, 2016, p. 200) claimed that literary translation was mainly controlled by "professionals within the literary system", including critics, reviewers and translators etc., and "patronage outside the literary system", including powerful people and institutions like publishers, media, political parties etc., and comprising three components, which were: the ideological element, the economic one and the status one. The scholar also stated that while *patronage wields* had the greatest power in the ideological operation, professionals had the greatest influence in determining poetics, which consisted of *literary devices* and "the concept of the role of literature", and if linguistic considerations conflicted with ideological and/or poetic considerations, the latter would often win out. In other words, the "most important consideration is the ideological one, the translator's ideology or the ideology imposed upon the translator by patronage". Lefevere also took different translations such as *virile*, *nose*, *leg* etc of the English word *penis* to illustrate his statement. In the Vietnamese culture where Confucianism seeing sex as a potential disaster for social morality is the ideology that still has a great influence on modern society, sex has become easy to joke about but difficult to talk about as proved by Khuat, Le, & Nguyen's study (2010). This would account for the reason why "cái ấy" (≈ "that thing") is a very common Vietnamese translation of the three English words *penis*, *dick* and *cock* while other more scientific terms like "dương vật" seem less popular in the Vietnamese subtitle of the English TV series named *Sex Education* released in 2019 on the streaming platform Netflix. This shows that when some translators have resistances to the authors' ideology, they tend to make the translation fit their ideology by some techniques, including using more euphemistic expressions or omission. In addition, the influence of *patronage wields* on translation can be seen

² Netflix is a popular streaming platform in Vietnam

through the right of publishers to changes of a translation. For example, the translation of a book's title can be changed by the publisher like the case of the English book named *Utopia*, whose title had been previously translated into *Nhân gian ảo mộng* by the translator Trinh Lu but later was changed to *Địa đàng trần gian* by the publisher without his acknowledgement (Trinh, 2006).

Third, obscenities are also challenges faced by translators for them being caught between reserving the original sense of the SL and using euphemistic expressions to bypass local censorship. For example, the curse "Fuck you dude!" in the movie *We're the Millers* was translated into "Đồ khốn" (≈ "asshole"), or "Shut the fuck up" was translated into "Im đi" (≈ "Shut up") instead of "Im mẹ đi" (≈ "Shut the fuck up") in the series *Sex Education* on Netflix. These translations would be judged by others including audiences for its incompletely rendering the emotional nuances of the SL. Such euphemism would even come under strong criticism when it causes ambiguity or bends the meaning of the SL. For example, the sentence "We're gonna get high and fuck tonight" in the movie *We're the Millers* was translated into the Vietnamese sentence "Chúng ta sẽ phê và vui vẻ đêm nay", in which "vui vẻ" (≈ "have fun") is the translation of the word "fuck". Criticism may arise on the ground that "we" (Chúng ta) in the context would have some fun by using some drugs and the meaning "having sex" of the word "fuck" would not be delivered to audiences through the translation. Another illustration is that the word "dick" was translated into "chày" (literal meaning is *Baseball bat* or *Pestle*) in the movie *We're the Millers*, which is at the risk of being misunderstood by audiences. Nevertheless, using a more vulgar term in the translation may be rejected by local authorities. These situations, therefore, will pose challenges to translators, requiring them to arm themselves with various techniques to get out of the dilemma.

Four, translation is widely believed to be under the control of the target culture as statements of many scholars like Bassnett (1991), Lefevere (1992), (Robinson, 2012) etc. **Firstly**, translators may unconsciously remove some emotional nuances, negative/positive meanings of the SL or add more meanings into the TT due to effects from their culture. For instance, a character in the movie *We're the Millers* neutrally claimed: "I'm not gay", which was translated into "Cháu không bị đồng tính" in TT. Because of the occurrence of "bị", which denotes that the subject of the sentence is under the influence of a bad thing (Viện ngôn ngữ học [Institute of Linguistics], 2003), the Vietnamese translation somewhat includes a negative meaning, implying that đồng tính (gay) is not a good thing. According to Pham & Dong's study (2015), abnormal things (gay) is still widely unacceptable in Vietnamese culture and around 50% participants in their study hold a belief that gay is a curable illness. This accounts why đồng tính is normally accompanied by "bị" like in these expressions: bị ốm (get sick), bị đau đầu (have a headache) etc. Such a Vietnamese translation, however, would be

criticized by others for its extra meaning added in due to the translator's unawareness regardless of his views (maybe good views) on gay issues. **Secondly**, cultural boundaries are uneasy for translators to cross over because of the lack of exact equivalents in the target language (abbreviated to TL) for cultural-bound words and phrases in SL and big differences between cultural beliefs of translators and those of authors. An example of the lack of cultural equivalents is that the word *qi* (a kind of life force) in Chinese has been translated into different terms in English like *psychophysical stuff*, *pneuma*, *vital energy* (Asia for Educators, n.d.), resulting in readers' different interpretations about *qi*. **Furthermore**, translators may get lost in translation due to differences in cultural values. Translators from Vietnamese culture with "high-context and collectivist communication that emphasizes role hierarchy and relations" (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2017, p. 221) would have to understand the relationship and social status between participants in a context when rendering an English dialogue into Vietnamese. For instance, the sentence "You all right, Harry?" in the novel *Harry Potter* was translated into "Con có sao không, Harry?", in which *you* was rendered as *con* which could be used as a *sweet* vocative by an elder to call or refer to the young person to whom he or she was taking to (Pham & Quang, 2008). Accordingly, the word *con* indicates the good relationship between Harry and Hagrid, and the rank of the two in the community. This illustrates a situation in which translators may be lost in finding the relationship and the social hierarchy of participants in a conversation in SL, putting them at the risk of using wrong address terms. Apart from vocatives, honorifics are also used for *respectful politeness* in Vietnamese verbal interactions, showing social relationships and respect to status as statement of Nguyen & Le (2013). This would account for such sentences like "The first-years, Professor McGonagall" being translated into "Các học sinh năm thứ nhất đây, thưa giáo sư McGonagall" in the novel *Harry Potter*. In this example, the Vietnamese translation of "Professor McGonagall" is "thưa giáo sư McGonagall", which includes the honorific *thưa* to show *respectful politeness* of the speaker to the listener. Such honorifics are usually required in Vietnamese for the reason that a *no-naming style* (nói trống không) is a violation of social norms as Nguyen & Le's claim in their study (2013). In this regard, translators need to be highly aware of cultural differences in order not to get lost in translation.

V. CONCLUSION

This study illustrates some influences from morality, ideology and cultural values on English-Vietnamese translation to prove that non-linguistic factors also hinder translators in their efforts to deliver good translations to readers or audiences. It is necessary for translators to be highly aware of these non-linguistic obstacles to make a better choice for their translation which would not cause confusion or misunderstanding, or be criticized by readers or

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social activists. Besides, it is worth noting that an English sentence may have different Vietnamese translations because text-based equivalence is not only determined by linguistic factors but also by people, acting and interacting in a social context and euphemistic expressions can be used for the translation of sensitive content when there is a conflict between translator's and author's ideology or when it is censored but such expressions should not cause confusion or misunderstanding. Finally, in-depth cultural knowledge of SL and TL may be a helpful tool for translators in reserving integrity of SL and naturalness of TL.

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