Unit 6  Translation

This unit focuses on second languages and the process of translation between languages. It draws on both principles of linguists as well as aspects of intercultural communication.

Learning Outcomes: Students who complete Unit 6 will be able to:
- explain the various approaches to translation
- discuss common problems in translation
- discuss the role of technology in translation

Key Concepts for Unit 6
- Definition and conceptualization of translation
- History of translation

► Second Language

An aspect of intercultural communication is the adoption of a second language to complement one’s native language. The social value of acquiring a particular second language is related to the perceived social status of people who use that language.

Often second-language acquisition is part of a general education program, particularly for young people. In many nations, for example, children study a foreign language from an early age. Additionally, many people voluntarily study second or multiple languages for a sense of personal satisfaction or to facilitate their ability to travel and interact with people of other cultures.

Members of a minority group within a larger society generally learn the dominant language of that society. Sometimes such acquisition is seen as a means of assimilating in the larger society, advancing their education, and enhancing their social and business opportunities. Research shows that the second language is more likely to be adopted if it is similar to the native language, if it is necessary for commerce or social interaction, and if it is used extensively even within the minority community.

Linguists and cultural anthropologists note that being part of a language minority within a society often leads to code switching (that is, to moving back and forth between various linguistic codes, such as languages or dialects). Immigrant families, for example, may use the dominant cultural language in school and in public, while using their native language at home. Sometimes, code switching is deliberate, such as when immigrant parents revert to their native language to discuss something not meant for the ears of their children, who may be less fluent in that language.

A related technique is foreignizing, which is the creation of a word or phrase that does not exist in the second language.

Two principles guide choices about using language codes in a setting that includes both those who understand and use the language fluently and those who may not. The virtuosity maxim implies that we should base language choices on the ability of the other participants in the conversation, using the language in which they are most fluent and/or comfortable). The deference maxim suggests that
we chose the language preferred by the other participant in communication when we are asking for a favor.

► Translation

Societies have learned that no one lives in isolation, neither individuals nor whole communities. At one time or another, it becomes necessary to communicate with a neighbor or to retrieve information from the distant past. In both cases, if the two parties do not share a language, the process of translation must be undertaken.

A translator (sometimes called a translatologist) is a person trained in the art and science of understanding two or more languages in relationship to each other, and skilled in the ability to interpret one language for a person or audience that does not understand that language. A translator has both a native language and at least one non-native language in which he or she is fully fluent (in reading, writing and speaking) at virtually the same level as a native speaker would be. Translators also may have additional languages with which they are familiar, often with a listening or reading fluency that allows them to understand the language but not necessarily writing or speaking fluency.

A good translator obviously is bilingual, preferably multilingual. This can lead to what is called natural translation, which means that translation is done informally by people without specialized training, merely as a by-product of their bilingual abilities. This often is the level of translation that fits within the teaching of a foreign language.

But translation involves more than simply knowing another language. It also involves understanding another people, another culture, another place and often another time; it also requires specialized training. Merely being bilingual does not guarantee that a speaker will have the skill to translate effectively between languages. Additionally, a translator must know the field in which he or she is working. For example, a translator of biological texts must understand the field of biology. Finally, a translator must be an effective writer and have the sensitivity of a diplomat.

Translators do more than merely substitute words one for the other in two different languages. They also major judgments about the people who produced the original message, called the source text or source language. Those message producers had their own assumptions, worldviews and presuppositions and their own social and cultural relationships. Translators first must understand the world and mindset of the creators of the source text. Then they create its equivalent in the second language, called the target text (target language).

► The Business of Translation

Translation work is associated with higher education, government agencies, legal organizations, news media, nonprofit organizations and businesses. Some companies and organizations have translators as part of their regular work force; others hire specialists employed by translation companies for temporary assignments. Most translators and interpreters are self-employed.

Translation generally refers to written communication, and translators are people who translate written language. However, there is a similarity to the interpretation process that is part of speech
communication, though the two have different training for essentially different skills. Here are some aspects of speech interpretation.

- **In consecutive translation**, the person requiring the interpreter participates in the communication directly. The speaker says something and pauses, the interpreter translates it into a different language, the respondent answers and pauses, the interpreter translates this response for the original speaker, and so on.

- **Simultaneous translation** is used for persons who are primarily listeners rather than speakers. An interpreter listens to a speaker who presents a message without pauses. The interpreter then translates the message into a second language while the speaker continues on.

- **Sight translation** is a specialized area in which a person reads a document in one language and recites it aloud in another.

► **Terms and Concepts in Translation**

**Translation**

- A communication (written or spoken) in a second language having the same meaning as a communication in the first language

- The process of changing a text from one language to another

- A copy made in one language what has been written or spoken in another

- Producing in a target language the closest natural equivalent of the source language, focusing first on meaning and secondly on style.

**Transliteration**

- A representation of the characters in an alphabetic script with the characters of another script, allowing the representation of the original writing in a second language

- A systematic way of converting letters in one alphabet or phonetic system into another alphabet

- The letter-for-letter or sound-for-sound presentation of a word into another language

- The substitution of one alphabetic system for another

► **Ingredients in Translation**

Some of the ingredients of a good translation are clarity, accuracy and naturalness.

- **Clarity** refers to writing that is smooth, easy to understand, and free of elements that hinder understanding.

- **Accuracy** refers to the faithfulness with which the translator has presented the original meaning. Some linguists make the distinction between **exegetical accuracy** (how closely a translated text preserves the meaning of the original text) and **communicative accuracy** (the degree to which the original meaning is understandable to readers of the translated text).
This latter term relates to naturalness, which refers to the use of language patterns commonly used by readers of the translated text, even if this is different than the structure of the original text. However, a translation may be natural but not necessarily accurate.

Translators also want to know the author’s intention or the intended effect that the writing was to have on its listeners or readers. This can allow the linguist to make appropriate choices when translating into a second language.

One method of testing the accuracy of a translation is back translation. That is, translate a sentence or passage from Language A into Language B. Then in a separate act by other persons, translate the same passage back from Language B to Language A. Ideally, the result of the second translation will be identical to the passage before it was translated.

► Approaches to Translation

The study of translation is more about approach or theory than it is about word substitution. Professor Said El-Shiyab of United Arab Emirates University explains that the theory of translation is a form of comparative linguistics. He sees translation theory as “not a scientific and/or systematic way of looking at a particular text [but] an ‘ology’. It is not only a framework of principles and strategies but also a background for problem solving.” The problem as hand is the interpretation of the source language into the target language. The unit of translation is not an individual word or phrase but the entire text, and the translator strives to understand the entire source text – its purpose, its author, its social context.

Indeed, situating the source text in a particular context and analyzing that context from the perspective of the target language is the translator’s first priority. It is only within that context that attention can properly then be given specific features such as tone, structure and function.

Essentially there are two styles of translation: literal or idiomatic.

Literal translations see the preservation of the original words as the highest priority, even at the expense of clarity and naturalness. This approach focuses on the form of the original language, often presenting more of a transliteration of words than a translation of meaning. Literal translations also are called word-for-word translations or more accurately, formal equivalence translations. However, the meaning of language rests not simply with individual words but rather in the relationship of words and phrases and in their cultural and historical contexts.

Idioms are nonliteral uses of language, as are understatements, exaggerations, metaphors, and a host of other literary devices. For example, the Arabic proverb asafir batni bitzaqziq can be rendered in English as the birds of my stomach are chirping, but such a literal rendering would fail to signify to an English speaker unfamiliar with Arabic imagery that the meaning was, I am extremely hungry.

Idiomatic translation takes relationships, contexts and literary style into account. Idiomatic translation refers to the process of presenting the original thought in the source text both accurately and naturally in the second language or target text. This is sometimes referred to as a free translation or a thought-for-thought translation, because the purpose of the translator is to preserve the original meaning, even at the expense of specific words and phrases. For example, the French phrase j’ai faim is literally rendered into English as I have hunger, but a better translation would I am hungry, adopting the grammar, syntax and structure of the target text.
Idiomatic translations also are called functional equivalence translations. Often, an idiomatic translation can be more accurate and meaningful than a literal translation. So the skilled translator will ask both the meaning in the original language and whether the translation means the same thing.

Understand that a translation is not the same as a paraphrase, which is a deliberate restatement of the meaning of something in different and often fewer words. However, a translator may occasionally use a cultural substitute by presenting a word or phrase in the second language that, while not exactly the same as in the original, carries to the second-language audience essentially the same meaning as the original.

► Problems in Translation

The process of translating from one language to another is full of difficulties. Here are some of the recurring issues that linguists have to deal with.

- Words and phrases often have meaning primarily within a particular culture, and one difficulty in translation is to account for the cultural context of individual words. Related to this is the idiosyncratic use of clichés and sayings.

- Related to this is the linguistic proximity of the source and target languages. It is relatively easy to translate between closely related language, such as Spanish and Portuguese. It is much more difficult to navigate the greater dissimilarities between more culturally and linguistically remote language such as Chinese and German, or English and Arabic.

- Some languages feature a certain ambiguity, such as the deliberate elimination of subjects or verbs that would translate as only sentence fragments into another language.

- Languages also vary in their use of ellipses; that is, words and phrases that are not used because they are understood to be present. Where is your mother? Home. Translation sometimes must add words to a sentence in one language to replace an ellipsis in another. For example, in English the Nile is understood to refer to the river in Sudan and Egypt, but in Arabic the term must be rendered as nahr al-nil (the river of the Nile) because al-nil is an incomplete term.

- Another issue in translation is the reading ability of the audience. A text intended for well-educated readers in Language A might not be understandable to readers of only average ability in Language B.

- Translation also creates a problem when a word in one language carries a different connotation or extended meaning in another. Consider, for example, the word no. To an American, “no” or “no, thank you” is a definitive and final statement. To an Arab, however, “no” is seldom taken as a final decision but rather as part of social interplay. A Japanese person, meanwhile, might say “I’ll consider it” when he means emphatically “no,” which in the Japanese culture would be too impolite to express so directly.

- Another difficulty is the syntax, the flow of sentences and the order or patterns within sentences. One language, for example, might feature short sentences that in another language would be considered choppy. Others languages have unique word patterns. Arabic, for example, generally follows a Verb-Subject-Object pattern, while English uses Subject-Verb-Object. Japanese, meanwhile, uses Subject-Object-Verb.
Likewise, translation is problematic when a word in a source language has a different structure than in a target language. Japanese, for example, has no specific future tense; yet-to-exist actions are signaled by context and innuendo. The single word you in English has a variety of syntactic uses and meanings, and a translator must know its intended role in both English and in a target language. Translating you into Arabic, for example, could result in ante, anti, antum, antuma, and so on. Selection of the appropriate word would require information beyond the English, such as knowing it refers to masculine or feminine, and whether it denotes a singular, dual or plural context.

Translation also must deal with the issue of syntagms, words conjoined because of a cultural relationship, forming a kind of fixed expression that does not translate easily because it is based on more than linguists. For example, fish and chips is a concept in British English that does not translate literally into Arabic (or even into American English), any more than klobz and malb (bread and salt) translates into English with the same meaning as it has in Arabic. This is because the meaning is imbedded in the conjoined expression rather than in the individual words themselves.

Finally, translation deals with the problem of neologisms, new words. Sometimes a word is adopted into a language more-or-less intact. Coke is Coke the world over. A place to buy food to eat is a restaurant in French and English, a restaurante in Spanish, a ristorante in Italian, and a resutoran in Japanese. Japanese is comfortable in picking up a foreign word, usually English, and pronouncing it phonetically with perhaps a Japanese twist, so Diet Pepsi becomes something like di-et-oh peh-puh-shi; train tickets are called both kippu (the traditional Japanese word) and ticketo (an obvious English import). Chinese, on the other hand, creates its own word for just about everything it adopts.

Translation of imagery offers a special concern to linguists. Imagery is the language found in poetry, songs, myth, and often in fantastic and sacred or religious writing. The particular feature of such language is that often it is not meant to be prose, which may be based on a logical use of language; rather it is poetry, which usually is meant to appeal to the emotions rather than the mind.

Translators generally make decisions on the appropriate approach to their work by analyzing several factors:

- The type of source text being translated and the subject matter (for example, the difference between poetry and a maintenance manual).
- The intended audience for the target text, its level of linguistic awareness, and its presumed use for the text.
- The translator's ability to understand both the source language and the target language, and the culture of each.

**History of Translation**

Throughout history, much of the impetus for translation was to understand and communicate with other cultures. The ancient Greeks wanted to understand the earlier Egyptian civilization; the Romans wanted to understand the Greeks; the Persians wanted to understand Greeks and Romans.
as well as the Indians. They also wanted to build commerce. So each culture put a priority on translating the writing of the other.

By the 11th century BCE, Chinese court clerks were engaged in translating neighboring languages, and by the 4th century BCE China had a state School of Translation. The process took on even more importance when China began adopting Buddhism. Chinese and Indian scholars, meanwhile, were debating the relative merits of literal versus free translation.

In the 3rd century AD, King Shapur founded the Academy of Jundishapur in Persia (Iran). The academy translated Greek books, both from the original and from Syriac translations. Caliph al-Mamun established the Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad about 830 AD for the purpose of translating all of the Greek books that remained after centuries of neglect and ruin. As translators, the school employed Chinese, Indians, Christians, Jews and Pagans as well as Arabs and other Muslims.

During the 7th and 8th Centuries, Christian monasteries in Western Europe further developed the art of translation, working with both religious and secular books at a time when Latin was the language of learning throughout Western Europe.

By the late 11th Century, after the European reconquest of Spain, the School of Toledo was established to translate Arabic books into Latin and later into Spanish. The school’s Bureau of Translation attracted scholars from through Western Europe, leading the 12th Century to become known as the Age of Translation. Meanwhile, a similar School of Translation was founded at Palermo, Italy.

Religious passions ran high in the mid-16th Century, and public execution was the fate of two translators: Etienne Dolet, the French translator of Plato; and William Tyndale, the English translator of the Bible. Martin Luther met a less fatal fate when he translated the Bible into his native German.

► Technology and Translation

Automatic translation or instant translation involves the use of a computer to translate a text from one language to another. This sometimes is called fully-automated machine translation (FAMT). Because language is so heavily dependent upon context, limitations in technology make this an underdeveloped ability. Current application of this technology seems most suited for highly repetitive translation projects involving a limited vocabulary, such as might be found in catalog or accounting activities.

Meanwhile, another development in technology is computer-assisted translation (CAT) or machine-aided human translation (MAHT). This technology is built on translation memory software. These programs begin with an extensive built-in dictionary and then develop an expanding base by reusing previous translation words, phrases and patterns, often giving the translator several alternative choices. Because the choices are archived, the software has a built-in continual enrichment of translation choices.

In general, translators are reluctant as yet to put too much faith in the technological approach to translation. However, because of the speed with which they operate, computers can offer what some consider an adequate “rough draft” for a translation project.
APPENDIX TO UNIT 6

► Relevant Web Sites

www.accurapid.com/journal/ – Translation Journal: A publication for translators by translators about translators and translation
www.accurapid.com/journal/28edu.htm – How to be a good translator (article in Translation Journal, by Leila Razmjou of Azad University in Iran.

► Relevant Books


► Unit Quiz

Define exegetically accuracy.
Define communicative accuracy.
Define transliteration.
Define sight translation.
Define formal equivalence translation.
Define paraphrase.

► Freewrite and Discussion

Explain the difference between consecutive translation and simultaneous translation, and give examples of each.
Explain the difference between idiomatic translation and literal translation.
Give an example of a cultural substitute.
Explain the difference between a translator and an interpreter.
Give an example of an ellipsis.
Give an example of a neologism in your language.
Explain the difference between translation computers and computer-assisted translation.
► Exercises

Ask students to find an example of something originally written in another language and translated into their native language, pointing out any translation mistakes or problems that could lead to misunderstanding.