Disambiguation in Translation

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Résumé:

This article attempts to shed light on the concept of disambiguation and how it can be applied in the domain of translation. It provides explanations and definitions of ambiguity and disambiguation as well as examples concerning both concepts.

It presents illustrations about how to avoid ambiguity in translation taking into consideration the case of certain examples translated from Arabic to French and English. Finally, the article tackles the techniques employed for disambiguation such as the use of semantic relations, the translation of the sense of the text and the use of computer-assisted translation.

1. Introduction

Any given message must convey a specific meaning that is understood from the context. In certain cases, the sense may be vague because the words used in the sentence lead to certain confusion in determining the exact meaning. Sometimes, some translated texts may display a sort of ambiguity. Thus, a process of disambiguation is needed to avoid such ambiguity.

2. Ambiguity

Ambiguity is linked to the fact that a word, an expression or a sentence may be interpreted and understood in several ways. It refers to a sort of vagueness in meaning. "A sentence is ambiguous if it can be true in quite different circumstances." (Kempson , 1977 : 128).

There are two types of ambiguity. These are: lexical and structural ambiguity.

2.1. Lexical ambiguity

It means that a single word may have more than one meaning which leads to a certain difficulty in identifying the sense of that word unless it is used in a context. For instance, the word 'pupil' means 'a person being taught' but it also refers to 'a round opening in the center of the eye through which the light passes'. Also , the word 'game' can be defined as 'a sort of play or sport with rules' but it may have the meaning of 'being brave'.

Another example is the word 'flare ' which has more than one meaning as it means 'to burn with a bright unsteady flame' and 'to become or make wider at the bottom'.

Therefore, words having more than one meaning may cause lexical ambiguity if they are not used in a specific context that defines their use within the given situation.

2.2. Structural ambiguity

It refers to the various meanings inferred from a clause or a sentence. Thus, "an ambiguous (declarative) sentence may be defined as a (declarative) sentence which expresses more than one proposition."(Leech, 1974: 79)

For instance, the sentence 'they met the French opera singer' can be understood in two different ways. It means that one can infer that they met a French person who sings at the opera; or they met a singer who sings at the French opera.

Another example is the utterance 'The man suggested to make a trip'. Thus, the first level of ambiguity in this sentence is linked to the question: is the man involved in the accomplishment of the act related to the suggestion or not?

In this case, the sentence may mean that a group of people should make a trip but the one who provided the suggestion was not supposed to go with them. On the other hand, this sentence may refer to the idea that both the man and the group of people should make a trip.

Another level of ambiguity is related to the question: To whom does the man make a suggestion? In this situation, one can understand that the man is providing the suggestion just to one person or he is talking with a group of people whose number may include two persons or more.

As a result, one statement can display several alternatives concerning its meaning. "Ambiguity is one – many relation between syntax and sense." (Leech, 974:79). This means that the form of a sentence and its structure may cause a certain difficulty in guessing its real sense.

Ambiguity can occur in any type of oral or written expression. However, it may frequently happen in the field of translation from a language to another due to certain factors.

3. Ambiguity in Translation

Translation is the act of transferring ideas from a language to another. It focuses on the interpretation of the meaning of texts. According to Larson (1998), the task of translation includes three components. The first element is 'the source language' (SL) which refers to the language of the text to be translated. In this case, the text is called 'the source text'. The second component is 'the receptor language' that denotes 'the target language' (TL) in which the text is translated. The final text obtained is referred to as 'the target text'. The other element involved in this task is 'the meaning' which has to be understood from the source language and re-expressed in the target language.

A good translation should convey the same or at least an approximate meaning that will provide the same interpretations when read in the source language without neglecting the cultural aspects related to this text.

Translated texts may sometimes underlie a certain ambiguity because of several factors that are mainly related to the nature of the words employed in the original text.

The first factor related to the ambiguity that may arise in the understanding of the meaning of translated texts is the problem of cultural differences existing between languages as some words may be used in a language but their equivalent can not be found in the target language. For example, the word " al'kutta:b " (الكُتَّاب) means in Arabic a school where children learn the Koran. However, there is no exact word that may be used to denote this idea both in the French and English languages.

Another factor is that sometimes certain words in the source language may have several connotations that may not exist in the target language. For instance, in Arabic, the expression 'annafs al ammara '(النفس الأمارة) refers to the soul that induces the person to do evil. When translated, this expression would be referred to in French as 'l'âme ordonnante' and in English as 'the ordering soul '. Thus, the meaning of this expression in the Target Language completely differs from its meaning in the Source Language. To avoid such problems of translation, a process of disambiguation should take place.

4. Disambiguation in Translation

The role of disambiguation is to facilitate the understanding of the meaning or message conveyed by a given sentence or text. The task of the translator is to disambiguate the sense of the translated text in order to keep the same meaning that was meant to be expressed by its writer. Disambiguation in translation is necessary as it enables to judge the quality of the target text according to two essential criteria which are the faithfulness and the transparency of this text. The former means that the target text should keep the same meaning conveyed by the source text. The latter refers to the degree of acceptability of the style used and its conformity to the rules of the target language.

Therefore, disambiguation means that the translator has to make the sense of text clearer so that to convey the exact meaning. For example, in George Eliot's ***Adam Bede***, the sentence " we can no more wish to return to a narrower sympathy than a painter or a musician can wish

to return to his cruder manner…"[1] may reveal a certain difficulty in the translation of the expression 'a narrower sympathy'.

The direct translation of this expression into Arabic would be 'Taatof adyaq' (تعاطف أضيق) but the sense is totally ambiguous since the noun 'taatof' and the adjective 'adyaq' can not convey a meaning. The same thing can be said when trying to translate this expression into French as it would be translated as 'une sympathie étroite' which causes a certain ambiguity in understanding the real sense of the expression. Thus, the word to word translation is grammatically correct but it is meaningless.

In this case, the translator has to understand the real meaning of the expression within the source text. In fact, when saying 'we can no more return to a narrower sympathy', the writer means the reconciliation with the self. Thus, when translating into Arabic , it would be better to say " innana narju al mosalaha wa al'safh" (إننا نرجو المصالحة و الصفح). Also , in French, this expression would result in : ' On veut la réconciliation' .

Therefore, the translator may use various methods to achieve sense disambiguation.

5. Methods of Disambiguation

Several techniques can be employed to achieve a level of disambiguation in translated texts. The following ones may be helpful and may lead to avoid getting ambiguous statements.

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[1] .Eliot, George, Adam Bede, England: The Penguin Group, 1859, p.499.

5.1. The Use of Semantic Relations

Semantic relations are very useful when dealing with the translation of words. One of the most important semantic relations is polysemy which denotes the different meanings of a word according to its use in a context. For example, in English the word ‘ stage ’ may mean ‘ a step ’ (when talking about a process) or ‘ a theatre ’ (when talking about plays). In Arabic , the word “ sa’il ” (سائل) may refer to ‘ a person asking questions ’ or ‘ a liquid ’ or ‘ a beggar ’.

In French, the word ‘poulet’ may mean ‘chick’ or ‘chicken’ or ‘dear’ or ‘policeman’.The translator’s knowledge about the various meanings of words will lead to a better interpretation and translation.

5.2. The Translation of The Sense of The Text

The word to word translation should be avoided since it creates ambiguity within the target text. Instead of this, the translator should focus on translating the sense of the text. For instance, a sentence in Arabic like “ taalu al’rasIyat shawamIkhan ” (تعلو الراسيات شوامخا) should be translated as ‘ the mountains are very high’.

Another example such as “ al’**I**bnu quratu ayni abihi ” (الابن قرة عين أبيه) would be interpreted as ‘the son is the beloved of his father’.

In this way , emphasis is put on the meaning rather than the translation of isolated words which do not have equivalents in the Target Language.

5.3. The Use of a Specialized Dictionary

Most of the time, difficulties in translation occur mainly because of the cultural differences that exist

between the Source Language and the Target Language. "The translator must tackle the SL text in such a way that the TL version will correspond to the SL version" (Bassnet , 1980:23).

This is why dictionaries that explain the meanings of cultural concepts and words related to cultural contexts should be used. Also, the publication of dictionaries of this type in different languages is necessary.

Dictionaries should not only provide the explanation of the word and its translation into different languages but also its various meanings in the source language taking into consideration how these meanings may differ in the target language.

The use of dictionaries is useful when translating. However, certain words that exist in a given language may not have an equivalent in other languages. Thus, the classification of such words in dictionaries that attempt to provide their equivalents or at least approximate translation in other languages is necessary.

5.4. The Use of Computer-Assisted Translation

The use of the computer for the process of translation may be very helpful since it displays a large amount of information about various languages. Also, for each word multiple meanings are provided. The translator will choose the exact words that suit the context of the translated passages. In addition to this, electronic dictionaries may be very useful. This will make the task of translation easier and will lead to save time. Nevertheless, the role of the translator is crucial since he is the one who evaluates the information provided by the

computer and decides about the type of vocabulary that is suitable to the context of the translated text.

Conclusion

A good translator is the one who attempts to use a good style in the Target Language without deviating from the writing purposes linked to the Source Language.

Ambiguity may occur when the words are isolated from the meaning of the context. In this case, disambiguation is necessary as it provides sense to the translated information. To achieve this goal, the translator should possess certain qualities such as the mastery of various languages and being aware about the different translation techniques. He also should have sufficient knowledge about the cultures of both the source and the target language. The use of technological means is very helpful since the computer can be a valuable aid when translating.

To avoid ambiguity in translation, one should keep in mind that the message conveyed by the target text should be identical to that of the source text without neglecting the acceptability of the style in which the target text is written.

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