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Pragmatic Failure and Communicative Success in Political Translation

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Abstract

This study analyzes the translation of Donald Trump's coded political rhetoric into Arabic. Using Gricean pragmatics to decode the messages and Newmark's theory to evaluate the translations, the research shows that literal (semantic) approaches fail to transfer the original's strategic ambiguity and ideological force. In contrast, communicative strategies that prioritize functional equivalence successfully recreate the intended persuasive effect. The study concludes that pragmatic competence is crucial for political translators, who must focus on a text's function over its form.

Keywords: Political Translation, Pragmatics, Coded Language, Gricean Maxims, Communicative Translation, Discourse Analysis, Arabic.

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الفشل العملي والنجاح التواصلي في الترجمة السياسية

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة ترجمة الخطاب السياسي المرّمز للرئيس الأمريكي السابق دونالد ترامب إلى اللغة العربية. باستخدام مبادئ غرايس التداولية لكشف المعاني الضمنية ونظرية نيومارك لتقييم الترجمات، يُظهر البحث أن المقاربات الحرفية (الدلالية) تفشل في نقل الغموض الاستراتيجي والقوة الأيديولوجية للنص الأصلي. على النقيض من ذلك، تتجح الاستراتيجيات التواصلية التي تعطي الأولوية للتكافؤ الوظيفي في إعادة خلق التأثير الإقناعي المنشود بفعالية. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الكفاءة التداولية تعد أمراً حاسماً لمرجمي الخطاب السياسي، الذين يجب عليهم التركيز على وظيفة النص لا على شكله.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة السياسية، التداولية، اللغة المرّمزة، مبادئ غرايس، الترجمة التواصلية، تحليل الخطاب، اللغة العربية.

1. Definition of Translation

Translation is regarded as one of the most essential tools for communication between nations, serving as a medium through which understanding can be achieved at every level. It is a complex process that demands a high level of proficiency from translators to convey meaning accurately and clearly. Therefore, translators must be familiar with various strategies that enable them to produce work that is both professional and precise.

Baker (1992:2) defines translation as the process of rendering the meaning of a source text and producing an equivalent meaning in another language. It is essentially an activity that bridges meaning across linguistic boundaries. Similarly, Toury (1995:7) highlights the multidimensional value of translation throughout history, noting that it not only lays the groundwork for global interaction but also fosters relationships between nations, promoting cooperation in technology, politics, trade, and peace. As a traditional means of communication, translation plays a key role in preserving and transmitting knowledge, as well as protecting cultural heritage. The value of translation, as Toury explains, rests on two main principles: (1) producing a text that holds a place within a specific language and culture, and (2) representing another language or culture within that context.

From another perspective, Abulhassan (2014:1) views translation as a science, an art, and a skill. It is a science because it requires in-depth knowledge of the structures of both the source and target languages. It is an art because it involves creativity and the ability to recreate the original text's meaning and style. It is a skill because it requires the capacity to overcome any challenges that arise during the translation process. Al-Jubori (2022:2) adds that translation serves as a means of communication between individuals who neither speak the same language nor share the same culture. Therefore, it is one of the most significant activities for transferring meaning from a source text in one language to an equivalent meaning in a target text in another language. Many scholars and specialists in translation studies emphasize that translation involves more than transferring linguistic content—it also entails conveying cultural norms to the reader or listener of the target text.

2. Translation as a Cross-Cultural Act

Translation is a multifaceted activity, understood as both a process and a product (Hatim & Munday, 2004). As a process, it involves rendering a source language (SL) text into a target language (TL) text. As a product, the final text reflects the cultural, linguistic, and ideological differences between the two communities. This dual nature means that effective translation demands more than linguistic proficiency; it requires deep bicultural knowledge (Aulia, 2018).

While definitions of translation vary, they converge on the core task of transferring meaning across a linguistic divide (Newmark, 1988; Steiner, 1998). Roman Jakobson (1959) famously categorized translation into three types: intralingual (rewording within a language), intersemiotic (transferring meaning between sign systems, like text to film), and interlingual (the traditional understanding of translation between two languages). This study is concerned with interlingual translation, specifically within the specialized domain of politics.

3. The Challenge of Translating Political Discourse

Political discourse can be defined as the strategic use of language by political actors to persuade, legitimize authority, and shape public opinion. Its language is distinct from everyday communication, often characterized by intentional ambiguity, powerful rhetorical devices, and embedded ideological assumptions (Yassen, 2019). Translating this type of discourse is particularly challenging because its meaning is rarely confined to the literal level. The translator's task is not merely to transfer words, but to decipher and re-encode persuasive intent.

Yang (2010) outlines several key considerations for the translator of political texts:

1. Reading between the lines to grasp unstated political meanings.
2. Acquiring extensive background knowledge beyond the text itself.
3. Maintaining awareness of cultural and ideological differences.

4. Navigating the nuances of "political correctness" and national sensitivities.

Political speeches frequently employ specific rhetorical techniques to achieve their goals. These include the strategic use of personal pronouns ("we" to signal inclusion and shared responsibility; "they" to assign blame), euphemisms to soften harsh realities ("low-income" instead of "poor"), and powerful metaphors ("fat cats") to frame complex issues in emotionally resonant terms (Bramely, 2001; Crespo-Fernandez, 2014). The translator must be able to recognize these devices and find functionally equivalent strategies in the target language, as a literal translation would often fail to convey their persuasive force.

4. Key Analytical Concepts: Ideology and Power

To understand political discourse, it is essential to engage with the concepts of ideology and power.

In the context of Translation Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology is not merely a set of personal beliefs but refers to the system of shared values and assumptions that underpin social and political power structures (Eagleton, 1996). Political discourse is a primary vehicle for transmitting and reinforcing these ideologies. As Van Dijk (2006) notes, ideologies shape how people understand social events and control their communicative practices. For the translator, this means that every text is ideologically situated, and the act of translation itself is an ideological one, influenced by the translator's own position and the dominant ideology of the target culture (Behtash & Chalabi, 2016).

Power is intrinsically linked to ideology. It is the ability of a dominant group to control the actions and, crucially, the minds of others through discourse (Van Dijk, 1993). Political language is an exercise of power, used to include or exclude certain groups and to legitimize a particular worldview. The translator is not a neutral, invisible conduit in this process but an active participant whose choices can either reinforce or challenge the power dynamics of the source text (Gurcaglar, 2003).

5. The Role of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in Translation

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a systematic framework for uncovering these layers of meaning. CDA's primary goal is to expose the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1992). By applying CDA, the translator moves from being a simple transcoder of words to a critical analyst of the text.

The application of CDA benefits the translator in several ways:

1. It helps identify the speaker's true intentions and hidden ideologies.
2. It illuminates how power relationships are constructed at a linguistic level.

3. It provides the awareness needed to make informed choices that produce a functionally and ideologically appropriate target text (Mahdiyan et al., 2013).

Ultimately, CDA equips the translator to understand that a text is not an isolated artifact but a social act. By analyzing the discourse critically, the translator can better navigate the complexities of political language and produce a translation that is not only linguistically accurate but also pragmatically and socially responsible.

6. Models Adopted

1. Grice's Cooperative Principle and its Maxims

In his 1975 essay, "Logic and Conversation," Paul Grice introduced the Cooperative Principle (CP), a foundational concept in pragmatics. The CP posits that participants in a conversation normally cooperate to achieve successful communication (Herawati, 2013). This principle is supported by four maxims:

- **Quality:** Be truthful; do not say what you believe to be false or for which you lack evidence (Juez, 1995).
- **Quantity:** Be as informative as is required, providing neither too much nor too little information (Li, 2015).
- **Relation:** Be relevant to the topic of conversation (Awwad, et al., 2019).
- **Manner:** Be clear, brief, and orderly; avoid obscurity and ambiguity (Grice, 1975).

Grice's key insight was that speakers often generate unstated meaning, or **implicature**, by deliberately failing to observe these maxims. This non-observance is not a failure of communication but a tool for it (Li, 2015).

2. The Non-observance of the Maxims

According to Gricean theory, there are five ways a speaker can fail to observe a maxim (Thomas, 1995; Palupi, 2006). For this study, **flouting** is the most significant.

- **Flouting:** The speaker deliberately and openly breaks a maxim to signal an additional, unstated meaning (an implicature) that they expect the listener to infer.
- **Violating:** The speaker intentionally and covertly breaks a maxim with the intent to mislead (Hanifah, 2013).
- **Infringing:** The speaker unintentionally breaks a maxim due to factors like cognitive impairment or poor language skills.

- **Opting Out:** The speaker explicitly refuses to cooperate, often for ethical or legal reasons (Hamani & Puluhalawa, 2019).
- **Suspending:** The non-observance of a maxim is expected due to cultural norms or specific contexts (Palupi, 2006).

3. Peter Newmark's (1988) Model of Translation

Peter Newmark (1988) proposed two primary translation methods based on their orientation:

1. **Semantic Translation:** This method is **source-language oriented**. It focuses on preserving the author's original form, syntax, and literal meaning as closely as possible. Loyalty is to the source text, making it suitable for authoritative or highly expressive texts where form is part of the message.
2. **Communicative Translation:** This method is **target-language oriented**. It aims to produce an effect on the target reader that is equivalent to the effect on the source reader. The translator adapts cultural and linguistic elements to ensure the message is natural and fully comprehensible. Loyalty is to the target readership.

The difference can be illustrated with the following example:

- **Source Text (SLT):** *Hold your horses, we still have plenty of time.*
 - (1) امسك خيولك ، لدينا الكثير من الوقت (1) **(Semantic)**
 - (2) تريث قليلاً ، فما زال لدينا متسع من الوقت (2) **(Communicative)**

Translation (1) is a literal, semantic rendering that is unnatural in Arabic. Translation (2) is communicative; it discards the SL idiom and replaces it with a natural TL equivalent that achieves the same purpose.

1st Subject's Translation

"Build the wall. Protect our borders. Make America great again."

Pragmatic Analysis:

The slogan's political power comes from its strategic simplicity and vagueness. By flouting Grice's maxims of Quantity (lacking detail) and Manner (being ambiguous), it creates two key ideological codes:

1. **Code of In-Group Consensus:** It implies that the problems are simple and that the target audience already understands the unspoken details.

2. **Code of Nostalgic Idealism:** It offers an emotional promise to restore an undefined, idealized past, which cannot be fact-checked.

Translation Evaluation:

- **Proposed Translations:**

1. (Literal) ابنوا الجدار. احموا حدودنا. اجعلوا أمريكا عظيمة مجدداً
2. (Evocative) شيّدوا السور. صونوا ثغورنا. لنعيد لأمریکا عظمتها
3. (Explanatory) أقيموا الحاجز لمنع الهجرة. أمنوا حدود بلادنا. سنستعيد أمجاد أمريكا الغابرة
4. (Populist but unfaithful) ابنوا الجدار لحمايتنا. دافعوا عن أرضنا. أمريكا أولاً
5. (Clumsy) ابنوا الحائط. قوموا بحماية حدودنا. اجعلوا أمريكا عظيمة مرة أخرى

- **Assessment:**

- Translations **(1)** and **(5)** are too literal and fail to capture the slogan's political force. Translation **(5)** is also linguistically clumsy ("قوموا بحماية").
- Translation **(3)** over-explains the subtext ("to prevent immigration," "past glories"), destroying the strategic ambiguity that makes the original powerful.
- Translation **(4)** captures a populist tone but is unfaithful, substituting the final phrase with a different slogan ("America First").
- **Translation (2) is the most successful.** It uses elevated, powerful Arabic—"شيّدوا" (construct the rampart), "صونوا ثغورنا" (guard our frontiers)—to recreate the original's monumental and defensive tone. The final clause, "لنعيد لأمریکا عظمتها" (Let us restore America's greatness), effectively functions as a rallying cry.

Recommended Translation: شيّدوا السور. صونوا ثغورنا. لنعيد لأمریکا عظمتها (2)

2st Subject's Translation

"Stand back and stand by."

Pragmatic Analysis:

The phrase's immense impact derives from its intentional ambiguity. The contradictory commands—"stand back" (de-escalate) and "stand by" (prepare for action)—create a dual message:

1. **Code of Plausible Deniability:** It offers a public-facing command to stop while delivering a private one to be ready.
2. **Code of In-Group Understanding:** The intended audience understands the implicit command without needing explicit instructions.

Translation Evaluation:

- **Proposed Translations:**

1. تراجعوا وانتظروا. (Passive/Weak)
2. تراجعوا وقفوا على أهبة الاستعداد. (Clumsy)
3. انسحبوا الآن، ولكن استعدوا للتحرك. (Over-explicit)
4. تراجعوا، لكن ابقوا مستعدين. (Good but over-explicit)
5. تراجعوا، وكونوا على أهبة الاستعداد. (Effective)

- **Assessment:**

- Translation (1) fails by using the passive verb "انتظروا" (wait), which loses the military urgency of "stand by."
- Translation (2) is linguistically awkward.
- Translations (3) and (4) use "لكن" (but), which makes the contradiction explicit and ruins the subtle plausible deniability of the original.
- **Translation (5) is the most effective.** The phrase "كونوا على أهبة الاستعداد" is a powerful Arabic idiom for being on high alert, perfectly capturing the weight of "stand by." Crucially, using "و" (and) instead of "but" preserves the original's strategic ambiguity.

Recommended Translation: (5) تراجعوا، وكونوا على أهبة الاستعداد.

3st Subject's Translation

"We will be a country of generosity and warmth, but we will also be a country of law and order."

Pragmatic Analysis:

This statement strategically uses ambiguity to appeal to opposing political constituencies. By pairing two potentially conflicting values, it creates:

1. **Code of Policy Ambiguity:** It commits to sentiments, not specific policies, allowing broad audience interpretation.
2. **Code of Dual Appeal:** It simultaneously reassures those who value compassion ("generosity") and those who prioritize security ("law and order"). The conjunction "but" is key to signaling that one value tempers the other.

Translation Evaluation:

- **Proposed Translations:**

1. سنكون بلد الكرم والدفء، لكننا سنكون أيضاً بلد القانون والنظام. (Flat vocabulary)
2. مهمتنا أن نجعل بلدنا كريماً ومضيافاً، مع فرض القانون والنظام بحزم. (Explanatory)
3. سنكون دولة الكرم والترحاب، وفي نفس الوقت دولة القانون والنظام. (Loses contrast)
4. سنكون أمة الرحمة، ولكن أيضاً أمة النظام. (Concise and effective)
5. سنكون دولة الكرم والترحاب، لكننا سنكون أيضاً دولة القانون والنظام. (Idiomatic and effective)

- **Assessment:**

- Translation (1) uses flat vocabulary ("الدفء", "بلد") that lacks the formal political register.
- Translation (2) decodes the message by changing the structure ("Our mission is...") and adding "بحزم" (with firmness), destroying the nuanced balance.
- Translation (3) is strong but replaces the crucial contrast of "but" with the simple parallelism of "at the same time" ("وفي نفس الوقت").
- **Translations (4) and (5) are both highly successful.** Translation (4) is powerful in its concise, slogan-like construction. Translation (5) is arguably superior as it uses register-appropriate vocabulary ("دولة", "الترحاب") and perfectly preserves the structural and pragmatic balance of the original by using "لكن" (but).

Recommended Translation: سنكون دولة الكرم والترحاب، لكننا سنكون أيضاً دولة القانون والنظام (5)

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the political power of Donald Trump's rhetoric stems from its strategic flouting of Gricean maxims, creating dense ideological codes that are lost in literal

translation. The findings consistently revealed that semantic translation fails to convey the pragmatic force of the original, resulting in functionally weak or neutral Arabic texts. Conversely, communicative translation, which prioritizes functional equivalence, proved highly effective by re-encoding the original's strategic intent using idiomatic and powerful language.

Ultimately, this research concludes that translating politically charged discourse is a pragmatic, not merely a linguistic, challenge. Effective translators must act as critical analysts, focusing on conveying the functional intent of the message rather than the form of its words.

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