

# THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATION STUDIES FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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In this Perspectives article, **Anna Bernacka** considers the role of the translator as a mediator between cultures. Rather than merely supplanting one form of words for another, the translator has the capacity to enhance our understanding of development issues and indigenous cultures by mediating ideas across cultural and national boundaries. The article presents case studies where translation has played a crucial role in bringing new learning and wider understanding to rich, indigenous cultures in India and South Africa thereby enabling languages to become more widely ‘utilized and promoted through education, working towards formal protection by the respective state constitutions and curricula’.

## Introduction

Translation is not merely an interlinguistic process. It is more complex than replacing source language text with target language text and includes cultural and educational nuances that can shape the options and attitudes of recipients. Translations are never produced in a cultural or political vacuum and cannot be isolated from the context in which the texts are embedded (Dingwaney and Maier, 1995:3). As David Katan in *Translating Cultures* puts it: ‘...the translator is a bilingual mediating agent between monolingual communication participants in two different language communities’ (2004: 16). Therefore translators not only have to be intermediaries between different language systems, but also have to be intercultural mediators – or as it has been stated by Aniela Korzeniowska and Piotr Kuhniewicz in *Successful Polish-English Translation Tricks of the Trade* – they have to be both ‘bilingual and bicultural’ (2006: 71). Thus, translation performs a crucial role in our understanding of the cultural ‘other’.

The role of the translator in mediating source ideas across cultural and national boundaries places him or her in a unique position in particular for understanding a range of development issues. Translating narratives from the global South is an invaluable source of knowledge about unfamiliar languages, indigenous cultures and experiences, and is immensely useful for gaining an understanding of non-European societies. Moreover, translation can also have a critical influence in politics and can act as an agent for reconciliation or social

integration. Translations can therefore have a distinct effect on how global and human rights issues can be conveyed and communicated.

The aim of this article is to emphasise different aspects of the translation process that are often misunderstood during a mainly linguistic and uncreative operation where one set of textual material is replaced by another. I will firstly focus on ‘unifying’ aspects of translation in view of the current situation in South Africa where there are eleven official languages recognized by the constitution, but where English has become a dominant language. Secondly, I will discuss the newly discovered Koro language and the difficulties that accompany its translation, a perception based on the Whorfian hypothesis that language is shaped by the world in which we live. This is where the translation of a language will allow us to open the doors to unknown cultural and linguistic environments. The results will arguably introduce rich developing world reference points to translation methodology and development education. Finally, in summary, I will stress the translator’s creative role, which often involves creating a new vocabulary in order to successfully convey the message of the source text. In doing this the interaction between the disciplines of translation studies and development education will become more apparent.

### **Interpreting Meaning**

Translations are never a product of a cultural void and there is a general agreement between translation scholars that ‘in seeking to transport words (and sentences and texts) from one language to another, the translator cannot merely search for equivalent words in the target language to render the meaning of the source’ (Dingwaney and Maier, 1995: 3). Therefore, as stated by Aniela Korzeniowska and Piotr Kuhiwczak, translators not only have to be intermediaries between different language systems, but also have to be intercultural mediators. The role of the translator is to mediate source ideas across cultural and national boundaries placing him or her in a unique position to understand various development issues. Thus translating narratives from the global South is an invaluable source of knowledge about unfamiliar languages and cultural experiences and is immensely useful for gaining an understanding of different societies for development education purposes in particular.

In the case of South Africa, the social as well as political need for translation is immense. At present, there are eleven official languages confirmed by the constitution in South Africa, not two as in previous years, although some critics would argue that official multilingualism is a façade given the dominance of English. The government has been ill prepared for a complex linguistic project where all the indigenous languages could coexist

simultaneously on an equal basis. In consequence, English has regularly become the only means of communication in everyday political, business and educational life. The other languages, most prominently Zulu and Xhosa, have become neglected in the social, cultural and political spheres as well as ‘the historically compromised Afrikaaner population’ which is still is ‘witnessing the decline of Afrikaans’ (Tonkin and Frank, 2010: 17).

The urgent need for the translation of indigenous books and other forms of literature in South Africa was the central topic of scholarly debate in 2009 at the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University (Ibid: 17). At this symposium Antje Krog, Rosalind C. Morris and Humphrey Tonkin discussed an ongoing initiative to translate African literature into English. They all concurred that in such a multilingual country, the translation of African literature and culture should be treated as a matter of primary national importance in that it would contribute to spreading the knowledge about lesser known social and linguistic groups such as Zulu or Xhosa. Furthermore, such a project would ‘not only make other voices heard but also... broaden the cultural base of English, the other cultures and peoples of South Africa in a multilingual discourse’ (Ibid). Translation can be seen in this context as an act of mediation and ‘a form of reconciliation’ between the periphery and centre, the dominant and aspiring cultures.

This translation initiative encompasses not only the translation of African literature, but also introduces and incorporates indigenous African languages into the South African education system. When implementing the project, which comprised of work ranging from African poets to astronomers, the scholars identified some frequent difficulties with the absence of equivalents and a vocabulary ‘gap’ in Afrikaans in particular. One of the linguistic difficulties encountered was the translation of the term ‘black hole’ that literally ‘in a direct Afrikaans translation would be “swartgat” – the infamous derogatory term for indigenous Africans’ (Ibid: 18). Antje Krog, who was in charge of the translation into Afrikaans, had to create new words borrowed from Dutch and to incorporate them into the target language.

Moreover, she identified a similar phenomenon in African languages such as Xhosa and Zulu related to scientific vocabulary. The absence of words describing not only the universe and the planetary system, but also the key terms used in maths or geography would restrict the implementation of these languages into the South African educational system. In consequence, the team of translators used their creative skills and constructed new words instead of ‘simply Zulu-ifying the English word’ (Ibid: 19). However, the concept of the

vocabulary gap does not only occur in the translation of English terms into African languages. It can also be observed in the reversed process where the English language lacks an equivalent term as in the case of the Afrikaans word 'mede-menslikheid' which literally means 'fellow-human-ness'.

Some scholars in South Africa claim that 'the officialization of the various African languages was more a gesture than anything else' (2010: 21), that it was politically motivated rather than culturally enhancing. Officially African languages were supposed to be treated equally, but in practice nothing much was being done to popularise lesser known African languages. Currently, however, scholars such as Antje Krog, Rosalind C. Morris and Humphrey Tonkin are undertaking an initiative to promote the translation of African languages – such as Zulu or Xhosa – in order to spread a better knowledge of these cultures.

### **Innovative Translating for Cultural Understanding**

Another example where translation facilitates the understanding of global South cultures is in the case of the newly discovered Koro language, an indigenous language that linguists have stumbled upon while researching Aka and Miji – two minority languages spoken in India. Koro was discovered during an expedition in 2008 that was a part of *National Geographic's* 'Enduring Voices' project (Morrison, 2010: 1). The linguists reported that the newly found language distinguished itself from the widely known ones in terms of words, sounds and structure. What is even more interesting is that it would appear that the territorial proximity of the Aka tribe has not influenced Koro to a significant extent and that the differences in sounds between the two languages can be compared to the difference between English and Japanese. Linguists have expressed concerns over this endangered language spoken only by an estimated one thousand people, especially because of the fact that Koro does not have a written form (Ibid). This crucial feature might also appear to be one of the prime difficulties that translators will have to face in this regard.

However, the challenge of translation in this case amounts to more than the lack of the written form. Gregory Anderson, who stressed that Koro depicts 'reality in very different ways', stated that Koro 'uniquely codes knowledge of the natural world in ways that cannot be translated into a major language' (Hotz, 2010). One of the possible reasons for this interesting means of describing the surrounding world and environment might be the isolation of the Koro speakers who as a community have been 'hidden' from external influences. Therefore, from a linguistic point of view, Koro could be a great example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language is strongly influenced by

the reality we live in. Koro words reflect the unique perception of the surrounding world by this north eastern Indian tribe. Thus, the translation of this indigenous language can be seen to be an invaluable source of knowledge about this fascinating culture and their existence. The language could provide an invaluable insight into their world view, their values system and their perception of the environment in which they live. In effect, sensitive and culturally appropriate translations can act as methodology for development in its most innovative sense. The role of translation in development education becomes self-evident as K. David Harrison, who introduced Koro to the rest of the world, suggests: 'Language revitalization will prove to be become of the most consequential social trends of the coming decades. This pushback against globalization will profoundly influence human intellectual life...' (2010: 12).

## Conclusion

As these two examples have shown, translation can play a number of different roles such as a 'unifying' or constructing new words but also, most crucially, as a source of knowledge about foreign, lesser known cultures. Thus, translation is not merely a linguistic process, but can also make a political and social impact - as in the aforementioned cases in South Africa and India. The translation process can be viewed as a way of introducing linguistic as well as cultural equality by enabling Xhosa, Zulu, or Koro, to become languages utilised and promoted through education, working towards formal protection by the respective state constitutions and curricula. Moreover, translation can act as a 'bridge' between the global North and the global South. If it were not for the translators' investigations and research into Asian indigenous languages we would never have heard about the Koro language. Indeed, it is through translation that we will eventually be able to become acquainted with the world of the Koro. The translation of this language will allow us to open the doors to an unknown cultural and linguistic world. It will also introduce a rich developing world reference point to translation methodology and development education alike.

## References

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