

Relationship between Pragmatic Comprehension and Translation of Culture-Bound Texts

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Abstract

In processing the source text and reverbalization of the target text, a great awareness of the pragmatically relevant differences between the source text and the target text is needed so as to achieve an adequate translation that can fulfill its communicative role in the target culture (Bernardo, 2010). To assess the relationship between pragmatic comprehension ability and quality of translation of culture-bound texts, the current study was conducted on 60 Iranian undergraduate students of English translation at a university in Iran. The instruments used for data collection consisted of a pragmatic comprehension test to assess participants' level of pragmatic comprehension ability and a culture-bound text to assess participants' level of translation quality. The analysis of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) revealed that level of pragmatic comprehension is a strong predictor of the quality of translation of culture-bound texts. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested incorporating pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of the source language and their distinctions with the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of the target language into class instruction.

Keywords: implicatures, pragmatic comprehension, translation quality

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics defined as “the study of how utterances have meanings in situations” (Leech, 1983: 10), from a translational point of view, operates in two different phases of the translation task: in the processing of the source text and also at the reverbalization of the target text. In both moments, a great awareness of the pragmatically relevant differences between the source text and the target text is needed so as to achieve an adequate translation that can fulfill its communicative role in the target culture. As a mediator, the translator functions as text receptor in the first place by trying to understand and capture the message of the source text. During this hermeneutic phase, the translator is bound to the source text pragmatics that he tries to decode appropriately. However, when coming to the next stage, that of the reverbalization, the translator realizes that a mere transfer of the source text pragmatics is not only impossible but also undesirable if the translation is supposed to be used as a

communicative tool in the target context. Besides, a translation asks for a special pragmatic treatment at two different levels: at the contextual level, since source and target linguistic and cultural contexts may diverge significantly and the target reader may not be aware of such discrepancies (in fact, the target reader must not be aware of them and it is a bad sign if he/she does) and particularly at the communicative level, as more information can be given than what is explicitly said in the source text. Also, the degree of explicitness versus implicitness varies considerably from context to context and language to language. Contextual distance involves not only cultural but also sociocultural dimensions which have to be reappreciated when transferred into a new environment. Even at a more objective level, there may be considerable differences when expressing relative distance in which social aspects as well as familiarity or non-familiarity, inclusiveness or exclusiveness, and also ironic use and impersonality can be expressed in a language and lacking in another (Bernardo, 2010).

The significance of pragmatic knowledge in transferring the message of the source text into the target text according to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms of the target language has been revealed in a number of studies by scholars in the field of translation. In one of these studies, Shehab (2004) investigated some major problems which translators may encounter when they translate Arabic utterances containing implicatures into English. The study was conducted by means of a translation task which included 9 underlined Arabic implicatures in their original contexts. The participants, who were 15 students of Master of English translation at a university in Palestine, were asked to translate only the underlined implicatures. The findings of the study revealed that in their attempt to translate Arabic implicatures, translation students, more often than not, adopted literal translation where functional or ideational translation should be used. The study also showed that translation students failed to identify the precise meaning intended by the Arabic implicatures, and thus failed to convey the appropriate meaning in the target language. In another study, Bruti (2006) investigated the extent to which the translation of implicit compliments can be successful with the addressees and whether the chosen translation can be considered appropriate for the target language and culture. The corpus of analysis was made up of various British and American films that had been distributed on DVD. The findings of the study suggested that implicit compliments can be successful in Italian subtitles when the original wording is skillfully reproduced so as to involve addressee in a cooperative decoding task of contributing meaning to the speaker's utterance. Otherwise, if something is expunged, the effect might turn out to be scarcely convincing, especially in a language that tends to favor exaggerated forms of approval. Hassani-Laharomi (2013) also conducted a study to compare the translation strategies used in translating conversational implicatures of English plays into Persian by translators before and after Islamic Revolution of Iran. Two English plays and their translations both before and after Islamic Revolution of Iran were selected as the corpus of the study. The results of the study showed that in the pre-revolution era, translators had a low tendency to explicate the implied meaning and they subjected themselves to the style and linguistic features of the source language. The same results were yielded regarding the versions translated after Islamic Revolution of Iran. However, in the post-

revolution era, translators' tendency to preserve the implicatures decreased. Most recently, Rafieyan (in press) examined the effect of pragmatic instruction on the quality of translation of culture-bound texts. Participants of the study consisted of two groups of Iranian undergraduate students of English translation at a university in Iran: an experimental group receiving metapragmatic explanations of pragmatic perspectives involved in their translation activities and a control group merely focusing on translation activities. Data were collected through three texts containing American implicatures adopted from VOA used as pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test. The results of between-within subjects analysis of variance following a semester-long intervention revealed the significant positive effect of pragmatic instruction on the quality of translation of culture-bound texts.

These studies conducted so far have investigated the way translators render the translation of pragmatic perspectives of culture-bound texts from source language into target language as well as the effect of pragmatic instruction on the development of quality of translation of culture-bound texts. Although the findings obtained by these studies confirm the significance of pragmatic knowledge in presenting a high quality translation of culture-bound texts, the direct relationship between knowledge of pragmatic perspectives of source language and quality of translation of culture-bound texts needs to be assessed. To fill the gap of research in this area, the current study seeks to investigate the relationship between translators' level of pragmatic comprehension and their ability to translate culture-bound texts according to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms of the target language. Therefore, the research question to be addressed in the current study is:

- Is there any relationship between level of pragmatic comprehension and quality of translation of culture-bound texts?

Accordingly the null hypothesis is:

- There is no relationship between level of pragmatic comprehension and quality of translation of culture-bound texts.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants of the study consisted of 60 Iranian undergraduate students of English translation studying at a university in Iran. The participants were all at the last semester of their studies; thus, they were considered to have passed the majority of translation courses and consequently possess a high level of linguistic and translation ability. None of the participants had previously visited or lived in an English speaking country; therefore, they have not had the opportunity to be exposed to source language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives or have contact with source language speakers to be able to develop their pragmatic competence defined as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language

in context" (Thomas, 1983: 92). Among all participants of the study, 18 were males and 48 were females. Their ages ranged from 22 to 32 with a mean age of 24.4.

Instruments

The instruments used for data collection consisted of a pragmatic comprehension test to assess participants' level of pragmatic comprehension ability and a culture-bound text to assess quality of participants' translations. The pragmatic comprehension test was a 40-item pragmatic listening comprehension test which was adopted from the tests used in studies previously conducted by Taguchi (2007, 2008, 2012). Each item of the test contained a dialogue between a male and a female native American speaker followed by a multiple-choice question with four options, one appropriate answer and three distractors. Participants had to listen to each dialogue and select the option which reflected the speaker's implied intention.

The culture-bound text consisted of some excerpts of news from Voice of America (VOA) which is the official external broadcast institution of the United States federal government. The criterion for the selection of news excerpts was the inclusion of abundant American implicatures. The researcher carefully reviewed recent news on VOA website and selected excerpts which contained the highest level of implicatures. The text adopted for the study contained 10 implicatures. Furthermore, to make sure that the translation students participating in the study do their best to present a translation to the best of their knowledge, the text was kept within a page limit (250 words) to avoid making the translation task tedious.

To examine the validity of the culture-bound text, content-related evidence of validity was used. The researcher wrote out the definition of what he wanted to measure and then gave this definition, along with the culture-bound text and a description of the intended sample, to two professors at a university in Iran who were experts in the field of translation. The professors went through the text and confirmed that the content and format of the culture-bound text are consistent with the definition of the variable and the sample of objects to be measured (Fraenkel et al., 2012). To examine the reliability of the culture-bound text, a pilot study was conducted over 32 nonparticipant senior undergraduate students of English translation at a university in Iran. The reliability coefficient of the culture-bound text assessed through Cronbach's alpha was 0.78.

Procedure

During the second semester of the academic year 2015/2016, 60 copies of the pragmatic comprehension test was administered to the translation students participating in the study. Participants were instructed to listen to each audio-recorded conversation and select the option which best represented the speaker's intended meaning. They were also warned that the recordings will be played once only. Immediately following the completion of the pragmatic comprehension test, 60 copies of the culture-bound text was administered to all participants to be translated. Participants were given ample time to render a high quality of translation of culture-

bound text to the best of their knowledge and were allowed to use any type of dictionaries they wished to use during the translation test. However, Participants were neither informed of the existence of the American implicatures in the culture-bound text nor warned of the significant weight of appropriate transference of these implicatures into the target language according to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms of the target language in assessing the quality of their translations. Following the completion of the translation test, the slips of both pragmatic comprehension test and translations were collected by the researcher and prepared for the subsequent data analysis.

Data Analysis

To measure translation students' level of pragmatic comprehension, 1 mark was assigned to each appropriate answer on pragmatic comprehension test whereas no mark was assigned to inappropriate answers. As there were 40 items on pragmatic comprehension test, each translation student participating in the study could get a mark ranging from 0 to 40. In this regard, translation students who obtained a mark of between 0 and 10 (the fourth quarter from the top) were considered at the poor level of pragmatic comprehension, translation students who obtained a mark of between 11 and 20 (the third quarter from the top) were considered at the weak level of pragmatic comprehension, translation students who obtained a mark of between 21 and 30 (the second quarter from the top) were considered at the strong level of pragmatic comprehension, and translation students who obtained a mark of between 31 and 40 (the first quarter from the top) were considered at the optimal level of pragmatic comprehension.

To measure translation students' quality of translations of culture-bound text, only the translation of implicatures was considered. In this respect, 1 mark was allocated to translations which poorly rendered the implied meaning of all American implicatures into Persian, 2 marks were allocated to translations which weakly rendered the implied meaning of implicatures into Persian, 3 marks were allocated to translations which strongly rendered the implied meaning of implicatures into Persian, and 4 marks were allocated to translations which optimally rendered the implied meaning of implicatures into Persian. The assessment criterion for assessing the quality of translations of implicatures was based on the principle of relevance theory developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). According to this theory the translator should try to adjust the degree of relevance in source language and target language by equalizing the pragmatic stratum of the translated text, through which relevance is obtained, with that of the source text. Then the translator should ensure that the target text yields enough contextual effects and does not require the target reader any unnecessary processing effort.

To ensure the reliability of the assessments, the quality of translations were rated by two professors at a university in Iran who were experts in the field of translation. The degree of agreement between the ratings assigned by the two professors was then assessed through Cohen's Kappa which is a measure of inter-rater reliability used to measure agreement between two coders (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014). The analysis of

Cohen's Kappa would give a value between -1 and +1. The interpretation of the values obtained through Cohen's Kappa, according to Landis and Koch (1977), are presented in Table 1. The inter-rater reliability assessed for the translations was 0.88 which, according to the guidelines set by Landis and Koch (1977), indicates an almost perfect agreement between the two raters. For cases which received different ratings, the two professors discussed until they reached an agreement.

Table 1: Interpretation of Cohen's Kappa Values

Values	Interpretation
Smaller than 0.00	Poor Agreement
0.00 to 0.20	Slight Agreement
0.21 to 0.40	Fair Agreement
0.41 to 0.60	Moderate Agreement
0.61 to 0.80	Substantial Agreement
0.81 to 1.00	Almost Perfect Agreement

To measure the relationship between the translation students' level of pragmatic comprehension and the quality of their translations of culture-bound text, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r), which is used to describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013), was computed. Pearson correlation coefficient can only take on values from -1 to +1. The sign out the front indicates whether there is a positive correlation (as one variable increases, so too does the other) or a negative correlation (as one variable increases, the other decreases). The size of the absolute value (ignoring the sign) provides an indication of the strength of the relationship. A perfect correlation of +1 or -1 indicates that the value of one variable can be determined exactly by knowing the value on the other variable. On the other hand, a correlation of 0 indicates no relationship between the two variables. Knowing the value on one of the variables provides no assistance in predicting the value on the second variable (Pallant, 2013). Cohen (1988) suggests a set of guidelines to interpret the values between 0.00 and 1.00. The guidelines, which have been presented in Table 2, apply whether or not there is a negative sign out the front of the r value.

Table 2: Strength of Relationship

Correlation Value	Interpretation
0.10 – 0.29	Small Correlation
0.30 – 0.49	Medium Correlation
0.50 – 1.00	Large Correlation

The squared correlation (r^2), called the coefficient of determination, was then used to measure the proportion of variability in quality of translation of culture-bound text that can be determined from its relationship with pragmatic comprehension. Squared correlation would give a value ranging from 0.00 to 1.00. Cohen (1988) has also suggested a set of guidelines to interpret the values of r^2 . The criterion for interpreting the values of r^2 , as proposed by Cohen (1988), has been presented in Table 3. All the

analysis was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 22.

Table 3: Percentage of Variance Explained, r^2

r^2 Value	Interpretation
0.01	Small Correlation
0.09	Medium Correlation
0.25	Large Correlation

RESULTS

Table 4 presents the descriptive presentation of level of pragmatic comprehension of translation students participating in the study. Descriptive data presented in the table consists of the number and percentage of participants in each level of pragmatic comprehension. According to the descriptive data, the majority of participants exhibited a low level of pragmatic comprehension ability being positioned at the poor and weak levels of pragmatic comprehension (86.67 percent) whereas very few of them exhibited a high level of pragmatic comprehension being positioned at the strong level of pragmatic comprehension (13.33 percent). None of the participants, however, managed to exhibit an optimal level of pragmatic comprehension ability.

Table 4: Descriptive Presentation of Levels of Pragmatic Comprehension

Levels of Pragmatic Comprehension	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Poor Pragmatic Comprehension	28	46.67
Weak Pragmatic Comprehension	24	40.00
Strong Pragmatic Comprehension	8	13.33
Optimal Pragmatic Comprehension	0	0.00

Table 5 presents the descriptive presentation of quality of translation of culture-bound text for translation students participating in the study. Descriptive data presented in the table consists of the number and percentage of participants for each translation quality. According to the descriptive data, the majority of participants presented their translations of the culture-bound text at a low level of quality being positioned at the poor and weak levels of translation quality (80 percent) whereas the minority of them presented their translations of the culture-bound text at a high level of quality being positioned at the strong level of translation quality (20 percent). None of the participants, however, managed to exhibit an optimal level of translation quality.

Table 5: Descriptive Presentation of Translation Quality

Translation Quality	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Poor Translation Quality	8	13.33
Weak Translation Quality	40	66.67
Strong Translation Quality	12	20.00
Optimal Translation Quality	0	0.00

Table 6 presents the results of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) analysis between translation students' level of pragmatic comprehension and the quality of their translations of culture-bound text. The first thing to consider in correlation analysis is the direction of the relationship between the variables (pragmatic comprehension and translation quality). The data shows that there is a positive relationship between the two variables, that is, the higher the level of pragmatic comprehension ability the higher the quality of translation. The second thing to consider in correlation analysis is the size of the value of the correlation coefficient. This value indicates the strength of the relationship between the two variables (pragmatic comprehension and translation quality). The value of correlation coefficient obtained in the analysis of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) is 0.844 which according to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) to interpret the values of correlation coefficient suggests quite a strong relationship between pragmatic comprehension and quality of translation.

Table 6: Correlation

		Pragmatic Comprehension	Translation Quality
Pragmatic Comprehension	Pearson Correlation	1	0.844**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	60	60
Translation Quality	Pearson Correlation	0.844**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	60	60

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To get an idea of how much variance the two variables (pragmatic comprehension and translation quality) share, the coefficient of determination was calculated. This can be obtained by squaring the r value. The coefficient of determination for the obtained correlation analysis is $r^2 = (0.844)^2 = 0.7123$ which according to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) to interpret the values of coefficient of determination suggests a very large correlation coefficient. To convert the value of coefficient of determination to 'percentage of variance', it was multiplied by 100, that is, $r^2 = (0.844)^2 \times 100 = 71.23$. This suggests that level of pragmatic comprehension ability helps to explain nearly 71 percent of the variance in translation students' quality of translation.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that translation students participating in the study generally exhibited both a low level of pragmatic comprehension ability and a low level of translation quality. Although few of the participants managed to exhibit a high level of pragmatic comprehension ability and translation quality, none of them managed to reach an optimal level in either case. The study also found that level of pragmatic comprehension ability is a strong predictor of the quality of translation of culture-bound texts. Translation students who exhibited a higher level of pragmatic

comprehension ability managed to present their translation of culture-bound text at a higher level of quality than translation students who exhibited a lower level of pragmatic comprehension ability. Therefore the null hypothesis of the study which states that there is no relationship between level of pragmatic comprehension and quality of translation of culture-bound texts is rejected.

These findings can be explained through relevance theory. Relevance theory deals with two concepts: the contextual effects which a text yields and the processing effort which the readers need to make in order to comprehend the text. The principle of relevance states that everything else being equal, the greater the positive contextual effects achieved by the audience, the greater the relevance of the input to the person processing it. However, everything else being equal, the smaller the processing effort required by the audience to obtain these effects, the greater the relevance of the input to the person processing it (Wilson, 2004).

The written texts of every language carry the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of the language which might be totally different from the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of other languages. Transferring the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of one language into another language without knowledge of pragmatic differences between the two languages will result in a text which does not provide enough contextual effects to be easily comprehended by the target reader. Therefore, the target reader needs to put lot of processing effort to be able to understand the translated text to some extent.

Translators who have a higher ability to comprehend and interpret pragmatic perspectives of the source language are equipped with the required ability to present these pragmatic perspectives in the target language according to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic rules of the target language. This enriches the translated text with sufficient contextual effects to minimize the processing effort by the target reader to a great extent. In the current study, translation students who possessed a high level of pragmatic comprehension ability were able to decode the source language implicatures competently and encode them in the target language according to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic rules of the target language whereas translation students who did not possess such pragmatic knowledge failed to provide the required contextual effects to reduce the processing effort by the target reader to comprehend the implicatures involved in the translated work.

The findings obtained in the current study are consistent with the findings obtained in the studies conducted by Shehab (2004), Bruti (2006), and Hassani-Laharomi (2013) who found that knowledge of source language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives contributes to a great extent to the quality of translation of pragmatic perspectives. The findings obtained in the current study are also in line with the findings obtained in the study conducted by Rafieyan (in press) who found that pragmatic instruction has a significant positive effect on the development of quality of translation of culture-bound texts.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed a significant positive relationship between pragmatic comprehension and translation quality. Translation students who possessed a higher level of pragmatic comprehension ability presented their translation of culture-bound text at a higher level of quality than translation students who possessed lower level of pragmatic comprehension ability. Therefore, teachers of translation courses are advised to incorporate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of the source language and their distinctions with the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives of the target language into their class instruction (Rafieyan et al., 2014a; Rafieyan et al., 2014b; Rafieyan et al., 2014c; Rafieyan, 2015).

The study was limited in the way that it did not include participants of various levels of language proficiency to determine the effects of both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge on the quality of translation of culture-bound texts. Therefore, future studies are recommended to include participants of various levels of linguistic and pragmatic ability to investigate not only the extent to which both linguistic knowledge and pragmatic knowledge influence quality of translation of source language pragmatic perspectives but also whether linguistic ability or pragmatic ability is the key predictor of translation quality.

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