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Connotational Transfer in Translations of a Speech

A study of connotations in translations of '*I have a dream'* by MLK. Jr

Bachelor's project in Translational Studies
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<u>Introduction</u>

Language, regardless of what variety, is used as a tool, and has been since its conception. It is used to convey motivations and communicate the speaker's intent. When we speak on a day-to-day basis, we choose our words to indicate our thoughts to our listeners. We use words that are generally understood by most to ensure that our listeners understand what we are saying. These words have something called a *denotation*, meaning the referential or lexical meaning of a word, which denotes the core meaning of an object (Ilyas, 2013, p. 249). Oftentimes we adjust our speech depending on who listens, who or what we are talking about and we moderate our words accordingly. Our attitudes toward people can sometimes cause us to implicitly or explicitly use words that contain negative or positive associations. These loaded words are *loaded* in that they can evoke thoughts that are either associated with positive thoughts or refer to negative ones, thereby letting listeners know the intent or attitude of the speaker. *Connotation* covers these loaded words and is a term that refers to the associations that a given word might evoke in the reader or listener depending on their respective cognition and personal experiences (Ilyas, 2013, p. 249). In literary text, use of connotations has a big role in the portrayal of plot, characters and overall setting and is one of the main ways of evoking feelings within the reader. However, when translated from one source language (SL) to another target language (TL), these same feelings and associations may get lost or altered as some connotations evoke different associations depending on cultures. Literary text is not the only medium which uses specific words to connote meaning to certain words. Speeches, such as a political speeches, can be quite effective on its listeners as some words may pull on emotional strings of the audience. Speeches such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s in 1963 '*I have a dream'* was one that addressed a very serious issue regarding racism in the United States and it is therefore important in translation to preserve the message so that it is as close to the original as possible. Word for word translation is not always feasible and not always the best solution as some connotations are culture-specific and can end up not portraying the message as intended by the original speaker. A word's connotations is in many cases connected to the language and its inherent culture, which the TL does not always have an equivalent for. In these cases, a translator may compensate by adding words to create a similar expression but can end up altering the intended effect on the readers.

In order to fully appreciate the original message of any expression, it may be in the best interest of the translator to follow a pattern which stays true to a form of translation so that the translation as a whole is consistent throughout. With that said, there are different

theories on the subject which pose different ways or patterns in which a translator can choose to operate when going from source text (ST) to target text (TT). Professor Peter Newmark, is one of these theorists and focuses on semantic and communicative translation. According to him, this type of translation attempts to produce an effect on the target readers (TR) as close as possible to that of the ST on the ST readers (Ranua, 2009, p. 23).

Although Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech can be recognized by any society that undergoes racism, it is culture-specific as there are references to politicians, states and in general is directed toward the people and government of the United States. It is therefore important to know when translating that some words might have the same referent but different connotations. Fragile meanings, culture-specificity and lack of equivalence are terms that will be focused on in this thesis. It is important to note, as I will be going through translations of MLK's speech, that I am in no way here to tell right from wrong, but simply to shed light on the potential loss or gain through these various translations. With that said, I present my thesis question as such: How have the connotations of loaded words and expressions in Martin Luther King's speech been transferred and is it possible to identify any loss or gain? In an attempt to answer this question I will start by briefly explaining the difference between denotations and connotations, their function as well as the implication of using them. I will implement Newmark's theory on semantic and communicative translation which seeks to explain the importance of producing a translation which maintains the ST's effect on the reader and carries it into the TT. Furthermore I will identify the means to which this can be analyzed and highlighted by looking at the Vinay and Darbelnet's procedure of modulation and transposition as well as diction in the use of synonyms and their connotations. To support my arguments I will refer to peer-reviewed works done on the same subject. In the discussion I will focus on the findings of my analysis and discuss whether the translators have or have not transferred the connotations to identify any potential loss or gain. Finally, I will conclude by presenting my findings and reflections.

Theory and analysis

Denotations and connotations (differences, function and implication of usage)

As mentioned earlier, the term 'denotation' refers to the lexical or referential meaning of a word, which denotes the core meaning of an object (Ilyas, 2013, p. 249). In other words,

it is the most commonly understood description of an object, allowing for a standardized referent. Denotations are most commonly found in places such as dictionaries which keep track of most words of a language. An object such as the animal *bat* according to Collins Cobuild dictionary is described as a nocturnal mammal, which roosts upside down, uses echolocation and lives on fruits and insects («bat», n.d.). This, to an extent, is how most people would describe a bat as it is the most commonly understood description or denotation of the word. However, connotations on the other hand can be a bit more tricky to define as the connotations of an object vary from person to person or culture to culture; therefore the bigger difference there is between the SL and the TL, the more complex the process of translating these variable concepts are (Abdelaal, 2018, p. 77). Jianhua Sun of Dalian Neusoft University of Information in China describes the concept as such: «Connotation is commonly understood as the subjective, cultural or emotional association that some word or phrase carries, in addition to the word or phrase's explicit or literal meaning, which is its denotation» (2019, p. 1). With that in mind, some cultures who live relatively close to, or see bats on a more frequent basis might connote different meanings to a bat than someone who has never seen a bat other than in movies where they are associated with vampires, bloodsucking and danger. The same principle goes for differences in languages where the synonym for a word in one language has different connotations in another, which we will get into in our analysis of Martin Luther King Jr's speech 'I have a dream'.

Newmark's semantic and communicative translation theory (do the translations preserve the effect?)

What Newmark's semantic and communicative translation focuses on is a theory of duality. On the one hand you have semantic translation, which attempts to create an exact version contextually of the original, based on what the second language allows semantically and syntactically (Zheng, 2017, p. 628). On the other hand you have communicative translation, which attempts to preserve the effect of the readers of the original and provide the same to the target audience (Zheng, 2017, p. 628). What that means, essentially, is that he does not want the translator looking at individual words to create as similar a text as possible, but rather look at the meaning of the words in the context they are given in, thereby preserving the semantic features of the source text (Ranua, 2009, p. 24). To put into perspective the effect of MLK Jr's speech, you can compare the speech '*I have a dream*' to a scientific article and see what type of information is being conveyed. A scientific article aims to inform the reader of factual details, leaving out any personal opinions or politics. Newmark

argues that semantic translation is better suited for such texts. This speech, on the other hand, was a political cry for justice and aimed to create awareness of the racism in the country and to evoke the feelings of all who listened. An expressive text, or in this case speech, such as this, Newmark would recommend a communicative translation as the goal of MLK Jr's speech was to produce an expressive effect on his listeners. In translating this speech Newmark would argue that the feeling of injustice and oppression needs to be preserved and therefore, the translator must find the synonyms with the most appropriate connotations in the given context in order to give the target readers the same effect as the readers of the original. However, even though the effect can be replicated, Newmark also stressed the semantic features of translation, which require the translated words to follow syntactic and semantic structures. This is the challenge that he stresses the importance of within translation and which best represents the original work by the author, or in this case speaker. To put theory into practice we will take a look at a few examples of Norwegian translations of an excerpt from the speech to see whether or not there has been a transfer of connotations from ST to TT. Since we are looking at the transfer of meaning from one language to another, we will be looking mainly at the process of direct translation, but also, as we will see, the process of transposition, as some of these examples have arranged the words differently from the original.

Analysis (procedure of direct translation and transposition in MLK translations)

Before we begin, it may prove useful to introduce the two processes of direct translation and transposition as these are the ones found in the following translations. The process of direct translation is a more word-for-word translation which, as the name suggests, translates words quite directly into the TL. This is a process which fits translations between languages of same or similar cultures as the connotations tend to be shared. One example could be from «*the two cars collided*» in the ST to «*de to bilene kolliderte*» in the TT. Every word of the ST has its own directly translated counterpart, if you will, in the TT. The process of transposition is that of the change or transpositioning of a word or group of words where a ST word could be changed for another in the TT while maintaining sense of the sentence and with a different grammatical form. An example here could be «*they had a victory*» to «*they had won*», from noun (victory) to verb (had won). Firstly, I will introduce an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech to compare the different translations to, and furthermore we will get into whether or not there has been any loss or gain in the transfer of connotations:

> «I have a dream that one day even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.»

(Martin Luther King Jr., 1963)

Example 1:

> Jeg har en drøm om at en dag vil selv staten Mississippi, en stat som kveles av urettferdighetens hete, bli forvandlet til en oase av frihet og rettferdighet.

(Hagerup, in *Drømmer*, 2009)

The English expression 'sweltering' has in this translation been rendered into Norwegian as *kveles av*, which in its own culture is more associated with asphyxiation and less about the dizzying and uncomfortable heat which is in this context used to describe the almost passionate hatred and racism towards people of color. Another point to make is that of the loss in this translation as 'sweltering with the heat of oppression' has been omitted from the translation completely. This not only removes a significant part of the sentence syntactically, but also semantically, as oppression is a key factor of the speech's message regarding systemic racism. It therefore seems to not fully express the same connotation of overwhelming, uncomfortable heat that real hatred can conjure. One solution or approximate equivalent could be 'en stat med en svimlende hete av urettferdighet og undertrykkelse' as this both includes the factor of oppression but also gives a closer association to the southern states' dizzying summer heat which gives more of a representative imagery. With the exception of *kveles av*, the sentence can be said to have gone through the process of literal translation with the words positioned in the order which fits the TL.

Example 2:

> Jeg har en drøm om at en dag vil til og med staten Mississippi, en stat med en flod med hatet av urettferdighet, med en flod av undertrykkelse, vil bli transformert til en oase av frihet og rettferdighet.

(SigridfraEngetBlogg, 2011)

In this translation the translator chose to render 'sweltering with the heat of' into *med en flod med hatet av*. Here the word 'flod' does give the connotation of overwhelming, however, the word 'flod' is less associated with heat and more associated with an overwhelming amount of something, and most often, though arguably, this could be associated with water. In terms of loss and gain in this rendering of the excerpt, it is important to note the gain with the word 'hatet' which is not found in the original text. This word, being *hate* in English, does however transfer the connotation and semantic expression in which the speech is trying to convey about racism. On another note, this change from the verb 'sweltering' to the noun 'flod' (flood) is an example of transposition as the word class has been changed from verb to noun.

Example 3:

> Jeg har en drøm om at en dag, vil til og med staten Mississippi, en stat som
> visner i urettferdighet og hat, at den skal forvandles til en oase av frihet og
> rettferdighet.

> (Hellum, Daria, 2006)

The word 'visner' in this rendering of the excerpt can be translated into 'withering' and suggests that the state of Mississippi is withering with injustice. *Withering* is a word which can be argued to often be associated with plants drying up, becoming weak and dying (Collins Cobuild Dictionary, «withering» n.d.). Given that the speech is to some extent addressing a form of societal devolution, one could argue that the state is undergoing a sort of process of weakening. However, the word 'withering' expresses a bleak and weak connotation while 'sweltering' in this context is more fiery and intense. This translation, similarly to the first translation, has also gone through loss by omission, as 'sweltering with the heat of oppression' has not been translated but rather removed, thereby removing the factor of oppression, which is one of the main topics of the speech. This type of loss in translation is not uncommon as some words of the ST can at times be omitted without loss, semantically or syntactically. However, in this case, it does not transfer the semantic content as oppression is a central topic of the message as a whole. Additionally, *hate* has been added as a second noun of which the state is withering from. As this is not part of the original ST, we can along with the former note argue that this translation has undergone both loss and gain from ST to TT. From another perspective, one could also argue that, given the omitted part of the sentence, the translator has used 'hate' as a form of compensation to account for the loss.

In an additional excerpt from the speech, we will evaluate whether or not there has been a transfer of connotations in a specific part of the sentence (highlighted in bold), as illustrated by the following examples 4-6:

> «I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, **with its vicious racists**, with its
> governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification.»

> (Martin Luther King Jr., 1963)

Example 4:

> […] med de onde rasistene…

> (Hagerup, in *Drømmer*, 2009)

Example 5:

> […] med dens fordervede rasister…

> (SigridfraEngetBlogg, 2011)

Example 6:

> […] med sine hatske rasister…

> (Hellum, Daria, 2006)

As we can see in these examples, the translators have gone with three different adjectives to describe the object which in this case is 'racists'. I have chosen to focus on this part of the sentence and exclude the rest as the «*vicious* racists» described in the speech gives

a predatory connotation when combined with «lips dripping». This way, we can more clearly see whether or not there has been a transfer of connotation in the translations. Since there is direct translation in all three examples, we will be focusing mainly on the transfer of connotations. This predatory sense of an animalistic and malignant character is meant to portray the governor in a negative way. Vicious is therefore a negative connotation, and although these translators have chosen negative connotations, it is important to keep in mind which negative connotations transfer the closest meaning to the ST. In example 4 the translator has used 'de onde rasistene' which directly translates into 'the evil racists', and although it carries a negative connotation, it loses the predatory undertone of the ST. The word *vicious* has in example 5 been rendered into 'fordervet', which in Norwegian can be argued to bear the connotation of several things depending on the context. 'Fordervet' is often associated with meat, in that meat can get spoiled. A similar meaning to the word in a more social context would be 'corrupt', which would be relevant and with a negative connotation since it is a political topic. However, it does not preserve the predatory effect either as the 'spoiled meat' in this case would be referring to the 'vicious racists' which clearly is not the prey. Example 6 has rendered 'vicious' into 'hatske' which quite directly translates into 'hateful'. This also carries on the negative connotation as well as sharing a similar message to the ST, however, it does not carry any predatory associations and therefore does not transfer the connotation to the full extent of the original. What we can take from these examples is that they all transfer the same effect of negative connotations where the racism and hate is expressed, but they do not consider the allegorical tool used in the ST.

Discussion

The use of connotation in MLK Jr.'s speech with words like 'vicious' and 'lips dripping' is used as figurative extensions of animal properties applied to humans. This relies on the pragmatic effects of their connotation more than on sense or denotation, although, connotation is to some extent dependent on the denotation as the objects of knowledge (Allan, 2007, p. 1049). By connecting politicians and hate with animalistic and predatory associations, the message of the speech along with its attitude is made clear. Additionally, by bringing up a topic so relevant and large, concerning many people, these connotations help engage and evoke the feelings of both the victims of racism and the oppressors. Had the use of the word 'wolf' been used, 'vicious' and 'lips dripping' would be fitting as they are closely associated with the predation of the wild animal. However, had a lion or tiger been used, it would have been a different story even though they are vicious predators with dripping lips of blood when preying on food. Lions and tigers are more closely related to prowess and pride which are more positive associations. Martin Luther King Jr. uses the negative connotations of an aggressive predator which creates a metaphorical statement which is equal to several other statements such as hungry, ruthless, aggressive and dangerous (Beardsley, 1975, p. 196, in Beiruti, 2013, p. 81). Thereby, with the use of pragmatic referents such as animals to refer to politicians, the negative attitude is made clear and so is the topic of who is in the wrong.

In examples 1-3 there was some loss in translation due to omission as well as differing connotations. However, the translations still transfer a similar effect on the readers (or listeners) of the ST. The effect of compassion and injustice is made clear by the negatively associated synonyms such as 'kveles', flod med hat' and 'visner'. Although 'flod med hat'

bears a negative connotation in this context, 'flod' on its own carries more of a neutral connotation in this context and it could be argued that there is some loss here as well. With regards to the translation of the less negatively associated words such as freedom and justice, all three examples made overall the same direct translations with the exception of example 2 where 'transformert' is used instead of example 1 and 3's 'forvandles/forvandlet'. These carry the same or at least no significant associations and thereby cause no significant loss. One interesting point to include regarding the words used in the speech is the term collocational connotations. This is a term used for when some words are used for their connotations in realtion to their co-occuring words, or in other words, frequently occurring lexical combinations (Stubbs, 1995, 381). Taking that into consideration in this context, the word *freedom* is often seen with the word *justice* and is therefore an example of collocational connotations. The same principle goes for the opposites of those two words, being *oppression* as it is a co-occurring word phrase along with *injustice* in the context of racism. As example 1 and 3 have omitted the part of the speech including *oppression* this connotation is lost. Examples 4-6 illustrate how the effect mentioned from Newmark's theory is transferred even though there can be observed loss in that the predatory metaphor in the ST is not present in any of the TT translations. Whether or not this is important for the transfer of the effect of the ST, it is a loss of connotation as it creates an additional though rather subtle evocative effect by adding the qualities of a predator onto the racists.

This analysis of the differing translations of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech were as mentioned before only done to observe transfers of connotations and loss or gain, and not to criticize or tell right from wrong. All three translations illustrated fully functioning translations carrying over the effect from the ST which is the overall goal according to Peter Newmark. There is no misunderstanding the racism and injustice that the TT is portraying and although there are some translations that give differing connotations than the ST, the message is still carried through and the effect preserved.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have discussed the topic of connotations and the effect it carries as it is loaded with associations, either positive or negative. As mentioned in the introduction, connotations are often usen either implicitly or explicitly as they expose our attitudes toward someone or something. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech 'I have a dream' was directed at the people of the U.S. as a whole but also toward the government and the use of words such as «injustice», «oppression» and «vicious racists» help emphasize on his message. By looking at the use of adjectives in a speech such as that, it is quite clear what his intention is, which is to have the people of the U.S. wake up and see the oppressive and unjust racism which was and in some ways still is breaking down their people. By calling on negatively loaded words such as those mentioned and including children with hate and racism pulls on emotional strings of those listening and it is this effect that makes it not only a good speech, but also a fitting illustration for this thesis. Peter Newmark, a well-renowned man within translation studies came up with the theory of semantic and communicative translation in which he argues that the translator should aim to create an effect on readers of the TL as close as possible to the effect of the readers or audience of the SL. As we have seen in the analysis of the different translations of the speech, there are many factors that come to play in

preserving the entire work of the ST. Loss and gain within sentence structure, connotations within synonyms in the TT, between-the-lines metaphors and transposition to mention a some. As this text focuses on connotation, or in other words meaning, it felt relevant to include Vinay and Darbelnet's transposition strategy which is changing a part of a sentence by switching the word class of some words to create the same sentence only with a different structure and wording. The goal of this paper was to see whether or not there had been a transfer of connotation in the translations of MLK Jr.'s speech and if it was possible to identify any loss or gain. The findings of the analysis illustrate that there had been a transfer of connotations in all translations. However, one could argue to what extent this transfer reaches, as some translations, albeit include a similar effect, miss out on some elements of the ST. Although the translations transfer negative connotations and the message of racism, there is some loss due to omissions of some key words from the ST as well as differing connotations in some of the translations. The predatory metaphor of the ST is not represented in either of the translations and one could argue that this one of the factors that end up being lost in translation.

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