

An Introduction to the Difficulties in Translating Sacred Texts

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Abstract:

Religious translation contributes significantly to the development of translation as a subject. In the field of religious translation, the most frequently translated documents are sacred texts since sacred texts are central to a religion. However, due to complicated and sensitive cultural elements sacred texts contain, the translating processes of any sacred texts are filled with difficulties. To produce more adequate translation of sacred texts, the potential difficulties are ought to be studied and understood. This article will introduce the major difficulties in translating sacred texts and, briefly discuss current methods utilized in sacred text translation, and provide suggestions. Contents will be provided in the following order: reasons for translating sacred texts (introduction), linguistic difficulties in the sacred text translation, religious issues in the sacred text translation, current translation method of the sacred text, and conclusion with suggestions on the potential methods of sacred text translation depending on a translation's target audiences.

Keywords: Translation; Sacred Text; Religion

1. Introduction

Translation has been practiced for centuries as the initial attempt for cultural communities to reach and communicate with each other. Sacred text, as the carrier of morals and dogma of a religion, reflects an artistic community's overall cultural characteristics. Dated back to the Babylonian ages, through seeking functional similarities, Babylonians attempted to translate sacred tales from other languages into Sumerian [1]. Later, the development of civilization ushered translation activities to prosperity. In the Western world, Abrahamic religions, which attach importance to spreading themselves, gained a solid status. Through Christian missionaries and Islam Da'wah (فوحع), translations of the Bible or the Quran had been empowered with the most potent momentum. The same situation occurs in other regions on the planet; disciples and scholars also pursued sacred texts from religions like Buddhism and Taoism. In the modern era, critiques of the dominating Christian religion and occult revival in the Western world have led to another religious surge. For instance, in the nineteenth century, non-Christian religions were widely appreciated and studied in America for their inherent moral and spiritual merits [2]. Throughout history, translation has been stitched closely with religions. From the Septuagint to the latest translation of the Bible, the demand for translations of sacred texts from different religions ever exists.

Despite spontaneous missionary work, there are two oth-

er major factors that explain why translations of sacred texts are widely demanded. The first factor is the ongoing process of immigration. When a cultural community migrates from one region to another to adapt to local life and integrate themselves into the local community, immigrants often choose to acquire local languages. Thus, after generations of development, their sacred texts have to be translated into their current language to meet the demands of the new generation. The other factor is also related to immigration. Languages vary through time. Any form of cultural communication may add new concepts or expressions to a language. Under the current globalization, every language will encounter semantic and syntactic changes. Rapid change in languages will lead to the formation of archaism. Thus, their corresponding translations require updates to maintain the status of sacred texts. By replacing outdated expressions with recent forms, the readabilities of sacred texts would achieve better performance in younger generations. Expecting improving readability and updating translations of sacred texts could also contribute to the dilution of the effect of old thoughts and social systems. Regarding old concepts and social structures, patriarchy would serve as an adequate example. Patriarchal ideology is commonly found in the process of translating sacred texts because patriarchy is the most widely employed social structure. Take "Elohim (אלהים)," a demonstrative pronoun for God in Judaism, as an example. Although it has been widely accepted that "Elohim" reflects Jewish God's identities of transcending gender and

quantity non-determinacy, most translations still adopt the translation method of replacing “Elohim” with masculine and singular pronouns like “Lord” and “Him.” Through updating corresponding translations, mistranslation or ambiguity is caused by past ideological trends and social structures. All these factors demonstrate that translation is a crucial process for the last and propagation of sacred texts. However, some scholars define translating sacred texts as an impossible job. Although translators of all ages have shown great enthusiasm toward translating sacred texts, obstacles are inevitable.

To further produce adequate translations of sacred texts, translators should be aware of the potential obstacles in translating them. This article aims to introduce five significant difficulties translators may encounter when translating holy texts, namely the requirement of proper context in translation, the absence of equivalent substitutes in different languages, language death, un-translatability, and limitations of potential interpretations caused by translation. All these difficulties fall into two categories: linguistic issues and religious issues.

2. Difficulties In Translating Sacred Texts

2.1 Linguistic Difficulties

2.1.1 Context Mismatch

The first difficulty, context when translating sacred texts is context mismatch. The translation process is always done in a sensitive cross-linguistic and cross-cultural environment. Thus, contextual variables should always be considered regarding to a text’s meaning interpretation. Taoteching (道德经), as the first known Taoist work, is the central guidance and reference of the development of Taoism in later thousands of years. Naturally, Taoteching is considered the sacred text of Taoism. Extracting the very first line of Taoteching as an example, “道可道.” By analyzing this extract, we can present the importance of a text’s original language frame. In this extract, the character Dao (道) appeared twice. The most direct interpretation of Dao is “Path.” However, taking the essence and motif of the whole book into consideration, to present the implication of “Truth” or “Nature” in Dao, an adequate translation like “truth” ought to be taken. The interpretation of the second Dao in this extract involves “Co-text.” The Co-text of a word or phrase is its surrounding text within that particular document [3]. The character Ke (可) located in front of the second Dao contains the meaning of “Could be” or “Can.” With the limitation of co-text, translators would aim for other potential translations for Dao to complete the logic chain. Therefore, the second Dao

would be translated into “Said” or “Expressed.” Through the example of Taoteching, one could understand that even the most accurate word replacement won’t guarantee equivalence in the aspect of meaning [4]. Thus, translators must take the context of a text’s language into consideration to reveal the authors’ true intention. This principle is critical in translating sacred texts since sacred texts are known to have rich implications and religious-only expressions.

2.1.2 Leak of Equivalent Substitution

The second significant difficulty is the leak of equivalent substitution of words in different languages. The absence of equivalent substituting words is an inevitable issue for any translation since the difference in language systems is caused by people’s distinct lives. Namaste is a traditional greeting used by people in the Indosphere. As a common greeting word, the most obvious substitute in English would be “Greetings” or simply “Hello.” Yet, “Hello” is not equivalent enough for Namaste. According to Phillips in his book *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy*, Namaste has an underlying meaning of “Bow to your divinity.” [5] Thus, although “Hello” seemingly satisfies the function of showing a greeting as a translation of Namaste, it omits the meaning of the source text. However, due to the general interest in Buddhism and Eastern culture in the Western world since the nineteenth century [6], many Sanskrit-origin words are widely applied in English. For instance, Karma, Mantra, Bangle. When alien words gradually integrate into a language system or even become loanwords, seeking equivalent substitutions tends to be less necessary. Still, the integration of languages relies on interest and frequent cultural communication. “Salaam,” short for “As-salaam alaykum (مُكْتَفِيلاً عُمُ الْاَسْلَامُ),” is a daily expression of greeting between Muslims. It occurs often in Muslim sacred texts like the Qur’an. Salaam contains an underlying meaning: “Peace be with you.” Like Namaste, the most direct translation is also “Hello.” Nonetheless, adopting the strategy of keeping the original word without further translation might not be adequate. Since the medieval ages, anti-Islamic sentiment has been spread among Christian countries, which include England. Although countries in Europe did engage in communications between Islamic regions and countries, the common fear of intrusion and the commitment to their religion determined that European countries’ general attitude toward Islamic culture and immigration would not be reasonably positive. As for America and Australia, even though there was not much regional friction due to the majority of the settlers arriving there being Christians or even Puritans, the typical attitude toward Islam culture was also not optimistic [2]. Under these circumstances, in-

tercultural communication between English-speaking and Islamic regions was impossible until the modern age. In the translation of Salaam, most readers cannot absorb its underlying meaning due to the lack of historical accumulation in Islamic culture. Therefore, translators may face the dilemma of whether to sacrifice readability by adding explanatory notes to elaborate the meaning of Salaam or translate it with a greeting word and ignore its connotative meaning.

2.1.3 Language Death

The next obstacle that occurs in translating sacred texts is language death. A language is considered dead when no more users exist [7]. As for the current occasion for languages like ancient Greek, even if they can still be acquired from academic institutions, without active users, especially native speakers, they will lose part of their cultural heritage and explainability. Most sacred texts were written in a relatively ancient period of civilization, utilizing dead languages, which directly levels up the difficulty of translation. Consequently, translators must seek pre-existing translations of the original texts they intended to translate. The process requires additional effort and translators' mastery of other languages. Professor Crosby, who studies Sanskrit literature and Buddhism, proves this situation. As stated by Crosby [6], early Buddhism abandoned the focus on formal regulations and attached more importance to understanding texts. This attitude made Buddhism relatively inclusive toward language usage in its sacred texts or scripts. Benefiting from this attitude, Buddhism's influence radiated over a vast region. Thus, Buddhist scripts were translated into different languages. The number of Sanskrit speakers continues to plummet, causing Sanskrit's explainability to decline. As analyzed in the former part of this paragraph, facing a dead or dying language, translators seek existing translated documents of the text they intend to translate. Due to the regional influence and language diversity, translators must face the quest of numerous languages to achieve their goals.

2.2 Religious Difficulties

2.2.1 Holy Un-translatability

In translating sacred texts, except for difficulties caused by the linguistic issues of source and target languages, a religion itself could deny translation. The translation denial of a sacred text could be spotted through many aspects. In the Hebrew Bible, when Moses asked God for His appellation, God replied, "I am who I am." By stating so, God in the Hebrew Bible rejects any potential alternative for His appellation and assures His uniqueness and irreplaceability [1]. However, the translation process is based on the will to accept that two unique and distinct

entities described in two different languages could represent each other [8]. Thus, by assuring His identity of irreplaceability, the attempts to translate His name are denied. From another perspective, translation denial in sacred texts could be caused by the form they take. A majority of sacred texts are written documents of oral speeches. To some extent, many of the sacred texts retell conversations between Gods or deities and religious leaders. For the Quran, it is regarded as God's direct inspiration. Because the Qur'an is written in Arabic, these enlightenments from God should only be read and understood through Arabic; all translations are merely the sole interpretation for target languages.

2.2.2 Meaning Limitation Brought by Translation

Almost all sacred texts include metaphors, implications, and unusual grammatical usage. This phenomenon is caused by the educational function of sacred texts. Sacred texts share morals and dogma with believers. Therefore, most sacred texts conclude expressive elements like metaphor to extend their dimensions of interpretation. The process of translation would limit potential interpretations. When there is no equivalent substitute for a word or phrase, the translation will vary the original meaning. In most cases, variation in meanings is a negative procedure [9]. Through translation, limitations in interpretations will pose a threat to religious institutions.

3. Current Translation Methods

The difficulty in translating sacred texts is evident to all. Yet translators never give up on trying to produce translations. Like any translation, religious translation also struggles with two major translation formats: literal translation and free translation. Advocates for literal translation or formal equivalence attach importance to the continuity of original sacred texts. As Kirk [10] stated, the meaning lost during translation could be mitigated by adopting the literal translation method, which protects the authenticity of a sacred text. Moreover, keeping the original structure and expression could be regarded as a formal retro-ism. Through distant and old expressions, they create the mystique of a religion [11]. However, translations that focus on formal equivalence have a common defect. Their loyalty to the original sacred texts requires readers to have an adequate amount of knowledge of not only the religion but also the source language. The complex and heavy original expressions would prevent readers from understanding the meaning of the texts [11]. This requirement determines that literal-translated sacred texts are unsuitable for general religious propagation and individual interest-driven study. Free translations, by contrast, show great adaptation of the habits of the target language and cultural back-

ground. Yet, for researchers and religious practitioners, translations with dynamic equivalence are often short of research value. There is another form of translation, which is the literal translation with localized explanatory notes. Still, although this method seemingly finds a balance point in literal and free translation, translations like this set a high hurdle for general individuals with no relevant knowledge to comprehend.

4. Conclusion

This article briefly introduced the relationship between translation and religion, five obstacles translators might encounter when translating sacred texts, and current methods for sacred text translation. The rapid development of translation as a subject cannot be achieved without the translation research done in the religious field. While the core document of religion, sacred text, relies on translation to be propagated and revised. Regarding the difficulties in translating sacred texts, they are divided into two categories, linguistic and religious. The first significant issue for linguistic issues is that some words and phrases require specific context to be fully interpreted. The relationship between translation and context has been explored by analyzing the translation of the first line in TaoTeChing. The lack of equivalent replaceable words is the next problem. Due to various reasons, a word or phrase from the source text could not be accurately expressed in the target language. This situation is relatively more common in sacred text translation. Language death can also be an obstacle to translating sacred texts. Since many sacred texts were written in languages that the majority of people nowadays no longer speak, translators have to find pre-existing translations of the source text to bypass the dead language issue. The most unique and stubborn issue for religious difficulties is the un-translatability or translation denial. In some religions, translations of their sacred texts are not supported. The reason behind this phenomenon is that the languages or concepts used in their sacred texts are doctrinal and irreplaceable. In addition to that, due to translation limiting and damaging potential interpretations of the sacred text, translations of some sacred texts are subjected by religious institutions. In the current age, scholars are still debating which translation method is adequate for sacred text translation. Yet, no matter whether literal translation focuses on presenting the original features of a sacred text or free translation concentrates on producing fluent target text; they fail to be ideal for every kind of audience. Facing different demands of different audiences, producing a good translation requires creative compromise. From

my perspective, translation strategy should be determined by determining target audiences. Through confirming target readers, translators could make flexible decisions when encountering translating difficulties. When target audiences are researchers or scholars, translating a sacred text could lean toward literal translation. By adopting literal translation, translators have more latitude in addressing problems like lack of equivalent substitutes and un-translatability. As for less formal audiences, the translation of sacred texts could be more story oriented. By sacrificing a certain amount of professionalism, superior readability could be achieved, which could help with the propagation and understanding of a sacred text.

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