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Translating Rwandan folktales into English: a culture-based analysis

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INTRODUCTION

0.1. Introduction

Translation is an activity that involves changing a text from one language into another. The language is then the instrument by which this activity is carried out. It is a world-wide belief that every language reflects the culture that hosts it, thus, as this activity involves two languages, it also involves two cultures. Actually, one can say that translating from one language into another involves taking a text from its own culture and placing it into another. English and Kinyarwanda, as two different languages that belong to two distant cultures, are no exception, especially when it comes to translating folklore which is believed to reflect, to a large extent, the culture which hosts it.

0.2. Research question and aim of the study

The research question to be addressed in this study can be formulated in the following terms: 'what are the culture-related problems the translator would encounter when he embarks on translating Rwandan folktales into English for an international audience in general, and for children in particular, and how would he deal with cultural differences?' This question arises, firstly, from the fact that this study is concerned with the translation of folklore, which is part of the culture of the people who produce it. As such, it reflects aspects of the culture it belongs to. Folklore is, according to William R. Bascom (cited in Dundes, 1965: 284), a mirror of culture. Moreover, it is known that translating requires the knowledge of both the source culture and the target culture. Translating folklore requires, in particular, a sound knowledge of both cultures because folklore reflects specific cultural aspects of which translation may cause problems at the level of understanding if they are not given due attention. In particular, translators 'need', as Séguinot (cited in Katan, 1999: 10) says 'to understand the cultures towards which they are translating.'

Secondly, the question to be addressed in this study arises from the fact that translation and culture are in fact so interrelated that one cannot talk of translating without taking into account culture. As Toury (1995: 24) says, translations have been regarded as facts of the culture which hosts them. Snell-Hornby (1994: 27) also says that 'translation is a type of intercultural communication which enables a widening of the audience of a particular text across language boundaries'. Many other authors hold the same view. Vermeer, and Hewson and Martin (cited in Katan, 1999:14) describe the translator as 'bi-cultural' and as 'a Cultural Operator' respectively. This is to show that whenever translating is undertaken,

it cannot be carried out without taking into account both the source culture and the recipient culture. This is due to the fact that translation uses a tool, namely language, which is closely related to culture since, as Malinowski (1923/ 1935: 305) says, 'language is essentially rooted in the reality of culture.' Translating from Kinyarwanda into English involves, therefore, the consideration of the two cultures hosting the two languages. For that reason, one should ask oneself if the translation is likely to fit into the recipient culture or, in other words, if all cultural aspects in the source text have been rendered in the target culture.

The aim of this study is thus to examine Rwandan folktales from a cultural point of view and discuss how they could be translated into English by taking into account cultural aspects that are typical of Rwandan culture. In other words, the study consists in identifying the cultural aspects of Rwandan folktales that should be taken into account when translating these folktales into English. It also attempts to discuss some strategies which translators can make use of in order to produce translations into English that are appropriate for an international audience whose culture is different from the culture they are set in. However, although the study is concerned with the translation of Rwandan folktales for an international audience in general, it puts special emphasis on translating them for children. As far as the child variable is concerned, the study is intended to take into account children who can read folktales by themselves. The study has, therefore, as its main objective the translation of Rwandan folktales in order to make them available to the English-speaking world in general, and to the child reader in particular. The study also has as its objective the discussion of theories underlying translation of folktales as part of folklore and principles underlying children's literature and its translation.

0.3. Background to the study and choice of the topic

My interest in Rwandan folktale-related research sprang, in the first place, from my translation courses in general and from the theory of translation related to the relationship between culture and translation in particular. The concept of translating cultures aroused my interest in translating texts from Rwandan culture and made me direct my research towards this topic.

In the second place, my interest in undertaking this research arose from the thirst to promote Rwandan folktales. A great number of Rwandan folktales have been collected and

committed to paper but only in Kinyarwanda, except for a very small number which have been translated into French. Bearing in mind the idea of making them available to a greater number of people all over the world, I decided to carry out research on their translation into English so that they can be read by people who would be interested in them. Translating them is one way of making them available to a greater number of readers because I assume that not only they would be read in English but also they could be translated into other languages once they are available in English.

However, I decided to put a particular emphasis on translating them for children as their main readership because of the assumption that folktales constitute an interesting body of stories for children. The relevance of this study lies, therefore, in showing culture-bound problems that a translator may encounter when translating Rwandan folktales into English. In addition, the study contributes to analysing how the translation of Rwandan folktales can be better suited to their main target audience, namely children.

0.4. Theoretical framework

Translation Studies consists of two main branches, namely Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) and Theoretical Translation Studies (ThTS) (Holmes (1998: 72). Descriptive Translation Studies is the branch of the discipline that is concerned with the empirical phenomena of Translation Studies (Holmes (1988: 72). It is divided into three main kinds on the basis of their foci of research. These three kinds are termed product-oriented, process-oriented and function-oriented descriptive translation studies.

Product-oriented Descriptive Translation Studies is the branch that deals with the description of existing translations. In the first place, this area of study is concerned with the description of individual translations or text-focused translation description. In the second place, it deals with comparative translation description, where different translations of the same text are analysed and compared (Holmes, 1998: 72). Function-oriented Descriptive Translation Studies is concerned with the function of translations in the recipient socio-cultural situation. It deals with the analysis of the function of the target text in the target culture. The third branch, process-oriented Descriptive Translation Studies, deals with the process that is involved in producing a translation, or the act of translating. It is the area of translation studies that is concerned with the problems of what happens in the

translator's mind at the time of translating a source language text into a target language text.

Unlike Descriptive Translation Studies, Theoretical Translation Studies is the branch of Translation Studies that is concerned with 'using the results of Descriptive Translation Studies, in combination with the information available from related fields and disciplines, to evolve principles, theories, and models that will serve to explain and predict what translating and translations are and will be' (Holmes, 1988: 73).

This study falls within this second branch of Translation Studies. It is based on theories underlying Theoretical Translation Studies in the sense that it examines theories that can be applied in order to translate Rwandan folktales into English. However, it is also concerned with the function-oriented branch of Descriptive Translation Studies because it is concerned with the functions of Rwandan folktales in both source language culture and target language culture. Moreover, it falls within the branch of Descriptive Translation Studies because it aims at translating these folktales in a way that translations would play, in the target culture, the role that the original folktales play in their culture. It is actually concerned with cultural equivalence. However, as the study deals with a genre that is deeply rooted in culture, it is also concerned with the areas of culture and language. Language is not only a means of communication but also a means to transfer cultural values, beliefs and practices. Folklore, which is also transmitted by means of language, is another important element of culture.

In brief, this study falls within the framework of four closely related areas, namely culture, folklore, language and translation, and these are the key concepts on which it is based. In addition, text linguistics and text analysis also provide this study with important material because it is concerned with the analysis of existing folktales. However, as the main focus is put on culture-bound issues, it is mainly within the framework of cultural translation. Here, culture is given due attention since it is at the basis of understanding cultural translation.

0.5. Scope of the study.

Translating from one language into another involves the consideration of the cultures to which the two languages belong. Therefore, translating any text from Kinyarwanda into English requires the consideration of both Rwandan and English cultures. However, no researcher can claim to cover cultural aspects present in all kinds of literary genres in a study like this.

Taking into account the impossibility of carrying out an analysis of all the cultural differences between Rwandan and English cultures, the present study has been narrowed down to the analysis of culture-bound differences that exist between Rwandan folktales and English folktales, with a focus on problems that may arise when translating Rwandan folktales into English and strategies that may be used to address these problems.

0.6. Methodology

This study is conducted in three stages. The first stage consists in reviewing literature on folklore, language, culture, cultural translation, translating for children and text analysis in order to lay a theoretical foundation to the study. The second stage is concerned with an intensive reading of the sample folktales in order to identify the culture-bound elements that they contain. This is the stage which is concerned with their analysis from a cultural translation-oriented point of view. The third stage deals with the discussion of how the culture-bound elements found in those folktales would be rendered into English, the translation of one folktale and the discussion of strategies for translating culture-bound elements that are present in that folktale.

Since Rwandan folktales are set in a culture of their own, their analysis reveals cultural aspects that are typical of Rwandan culture. The aspects discussed are those related to the structure of Rwandan folktales, their characters, their setting, and Rwandans' style of life (clothing, food and drinks, cattle-related vocabulary, home building, social organisation, and beliefs and customs). All these elements are identified and an analysis is carried out to see how these folktales in general, and those elements in particular, can be rendered into English.

A sample of four tales has been chosen. Their choice is based on three main factors: their characters, their length and the cultural aspects they reflect. The first two tales, namely

'*Bakame, Inzovu, ingwe, intare, impyisi, inka n'ibivumvuli'* and '*Bakame n' impyisi' (Hare, Elephant, Leopard, Lion, Hyena, Cow and Beetles* and *Hare and Hyena)* are chosen because they are relatively short and have animal characters. The fourth tale entitled '*Nyirabazana'* (*Nyirabazana*) is chosen on the ground that it is a bit longer than the first two and has human characters. The choice of the fourth folktale '*Nyabwangu na Nyabucurere'(Nyabwangu and Nyabucure)* is motivated by the fact it has a mixture of human, animal and inanimate characters. Still, the cultural elements they all contain are the common ground for their choice.

The four folktales are then analysed in order to bring to the fore culture-bound elements to which the translator must pay attention when translating them into English. One folktale namely '*Nyabwangu and Nyabucurere'* is translated into English and its translation is followed by a detailed discussion of how strategies for the translation of culture-bound elements are applied to this particular folktale.

0.7. Structure of the study

In addition to the general introduction and the conclusion, this study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter discusses the relationship between folklore, culture and translation. The second chapter deals with children's literature and its translation. The third chapter, which is the core of this study, is concerned with the analysis of Rwandan folktales in order to identify culture-bound elements existing in Rwandan folktales and culture-bound problems that may arise when translating Rwandan folktales into English. This chapter also contains a sample translation of one folktale, attempted with a view to illustrating these culture-bound differences and discussing particular problems found in that tale and strategies used to solve them.