

THE UNTRANSLATABILITY OF TEXTS : HIGHLIGHTING SOME BASIC CONTRASTS BETWEEN ENGLISH AND INDONESIAN

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Abstract

As an effort to render meaning of an SLT into a TLT, a translator may encounter various problems. The problems may not only be due to linguistic contrasts between the two languages, but to cultural and geographical contrasts where the two languages are used as well. This writing has tried to highlight some basic contrasts between English and Indonesian in linguistic, cultural and geographical aspects that cause the translation problems. The examples presented here show that there are concepts in English which are entirely untranslatable into Indonesian because the two languages are used in two different regions and cultures. A certain concept is present in English, but is absent in Indonesian and vice versa. A certain concept exists in both English and Indonesian but the speakers of both languages have different perspective on the thing symbolized by the concept. So, although it is linguistically translatable, but is culturally unacceptable. Therefore the translator may not only encounter problems that are due to linguistic contrasts but also those due to cultural and geographical contrasts.

1. THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATIONwho asks his mother the meaning of a word

“Translation” is a very popular term. It is widely known and spoken not only by translators but also by laymen. Being aware or not, those who are bilingual or multilingual are always involved in the process of translation. They translate concepts from their native language into other languages as they speak.

For most people, their understanding of translation is the transfer of meaning from one language to another (interlingual translation). But actually translation process does not operate only between two languages but between a language itself (intralingual translation) as in “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language (Jakobson, 1959:233). When we go back to the psychology of child’s language learning, it is believed that translation process occurs in the mind of the child as claimed by Paz (1992:152-154). He says: “when we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child

is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into simple words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two languages, and the histories of all peoples parallel the child’s experience ...”.

However, our focus in this paper is not on that type of translation. The focus of our attention here is on interlingual translation as it is the type of translation where most people are involved.

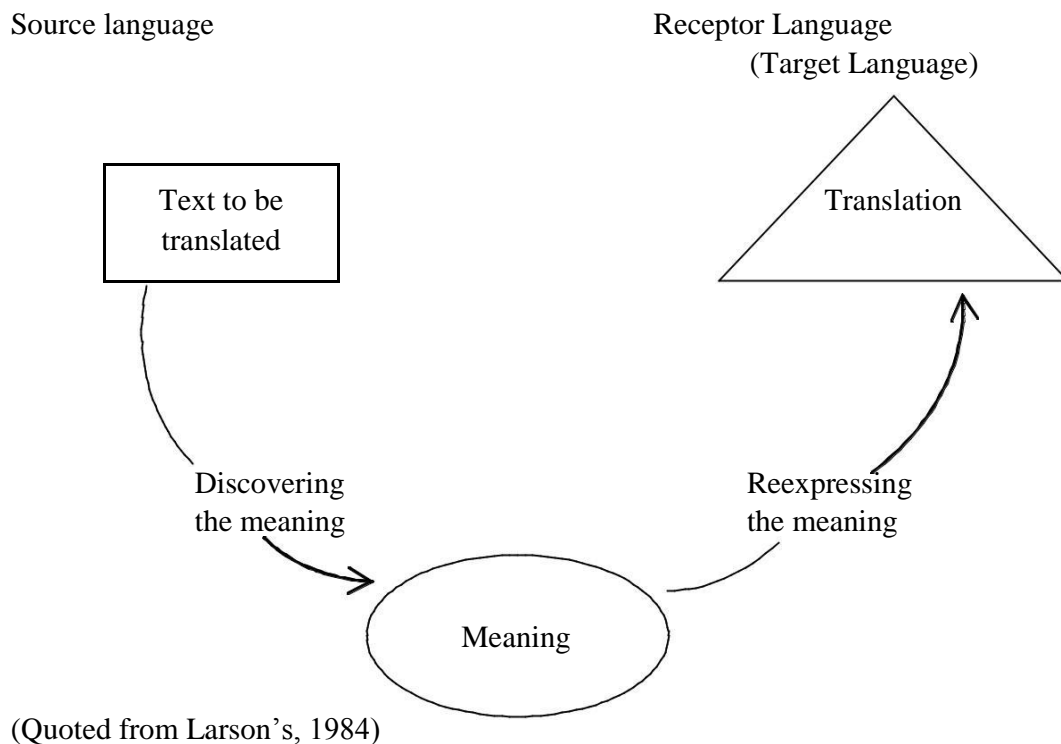
Numerous definitions have been put forward by translation theorists in the literature of translation and three are quoted below. We will see that, to some extent, they have similar understanding of translation although it is expressed in different terms. Catford (1965:20) defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). According to Larson (1984: 3) “... translation consist of transferring the meaning of the source

language into the receptor language. This is done by going from the form of the first language to the form of the second language by way of semantic structure. It is meaning which is being transferred and must be held constant.

Only the form changes" Papegaaij & Schubert (1988:11) state: "To translate means to express in another language the content of a given text The objective of translation is to replace the form and to preserve the content of the text".

The three definitions quoted above essentially give the basic understanding of translation. Larson, Papegaaij & Schubert explicitly say that the meaning (content) of the source language text must be preserved in the target language text. The form may

change. Catford uses the phrase "equivalent textual material" to replace the term meaning. Thus, we may conclude that translation is not just the process of changing the form, but also the reexpression of the meaning which is appropriate or natural in the target language (the language into which the text to be translated). In order to preserve the SLT into the TLT, of course, the cultural values and even the ideologies adopted by the readers of the translation (in their native language) should be taken into account by the translator as a translation can be linguistically intelligible but is culturally bizarre. The process of translation does not really look very complex as diagrammed by Larson below.



2. TYPES OF TRANSLATION

Translation is commonly distinguished into three types.

2.1 Word-for-word translation (literal translation)

This is a type of translation where the SLT is translated word by word or within the word boundary into the TLT. For example,

Siaran langsung dari Senayan in Indonesian is translated into English as:
Broadcast direct from Senayan

Here the translator just changes the form of the SLT into the TLT word by word without reexpressing the communicative meaning of the whole text. This translation reads strange and unnatural. This type of translation is uncommon except for those who study the contrasts of the structure of the two languages.

2.2 Modified Literal Translation

This type of translation is modification of the literal translation. Here some adjustments are made. There are adjustments of structure, and the translation is done within the higher level such as phrase or clause level.

Siaran langsung Dari Senayan, is translated into
direct broadcast from Senayan.

Here the translation is done within the phrase level such as direct broadcast and it follows the TL structure, that is, the modifier occurs before the head. But this translation is still unnatural and does not communicate the total meaning of the text.

2.3 Idiomatic (free) Translation

This is a type of translation most translators are very familiar with. The purpose of the translation is to transfer the meaning of the SLT into a meaning which is appropriate or natural in the TL or to find the closest equivalent which is available in the target language. The ideal goal of the translator here is to make the translation that

reads as it is originally written in the TL. In other words the reader does not realize that the text he is reading is a translation. So, the translator's goal here is to transfer the meaning of the SLT as accurately as possible into the TL, even though as a result of the process of translation the form of the TLT looks quite differently from the SLT. A sentence in the SL may become a phrase in the TL or an active sentence in the SL is translated into a passive sentence in the TL as it is structurally required by the TL. For example, *dilarang merokok* should not be translated into *smoking is forbidden* for *no smoking* is the expression most English speakers usually use and although *smoking is forbidden* is both intelligible to all normal speakers of English and is grammatical.

3. PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATION

As mentioned above for most people the best translation is one which sounds an original text. In other words the reader reads the translated text as he reads an original text. This is the goal of idiomatic or free translation as claimed by Larson (1984). However some translators do not agree with this principle as shown by the statements below.

- 1.a. a translation must give the words of the original.
- b. a translation must give the ideas of the original.
- 2.a. a translation should read like translation.
- b. a translation should read like an original work.
- 3.a. a translation should reflect the style of the original.
- b. a translation should possess the style of the translator.
- 4.a. a translation may never add to or omit from the original.
- b. a translation may add to or omit from the original. (quoted from Savory's, 1968).

The first sets of principles are based on faithfulness that a translator is not the writer of the original work. Therefore he must be faithful. It is not his right to add to or omit or

change the style of the original. His function is only to act as a bridge between the mind of the author and the mind of the reader. But a translator who adopts the principles will soon have problems since there are many concepts in the SL which are completely or partially untranslatable into the TL and there are things or expressions which exist in the SL but do not exist in the TL. For example, in English *good evening* is used to greet when meeting someone at night and *good night* is used leaving someone. In Indonesian *selamat malam* is used for both purposes. So a greeting to be used when leaving someone at night is not available in Indonesian. When we translate the four kinds of greeting in English to other languages like Toba Batak, the problem may become more serious for there is only one expression used by its speakers to greet people at any time that is *horas*.

The second sets of principles are based on the purposes of the translation, that is, to create a text that is intelligible to the readers for if the translation reads foreign, unnatural and difficult to understand, the readers will stop reading it and the work of translation is useless. However, an idiomatic translation, is an ideal aim which is, not to say impossible, very hard to achieve and it takes much time, patience and care as exemplified in the section to follow.

4. TRANSLATABILITY AND UNTRANSLATABILITY

Very often that the work of translation runs smoothly without obstruction, but it is not seldom that translation becomes a difficult job and is very time-consuming. When the linguistic system, geography and the cultures of the SL and the TL are not so distinct, then normally the translator's work will not be very difficult. Suppose one translates an Indonesian text into Malay, we may expect that there will be fewer problems than when translating the same text into English since linguistically, culturally and geographically Malay has more in common to Indonesian; even the two languages derive from the same source. Whereas between Indonesian and English the differences in the

three aspects are so great. Indonesian belongs to Malayo-Polynesian (Austronesian) language family while English belongs to Indoeuropean; geographically both countries are different, not only the people are different but also the animals, plants and the climate of the two countries, to some extent, are different. And English (western) cultures and Indonesian (eastern) cultures are no doubt so distinct.

In the following section we will see how certain words and expressions in Indonesian cannot be fully translated into English and vice versa and even some cannot be translated at all because the words or the expressions in one language do not have equivalents in another or, if they have, they are not fully correspondent due to linguistic, cultural and geographical dissimilarities in the two countries.

5. LINGUISTIC CONTRASTS

5.1 System of Pronoun

Although the system of pronoun of English and Indonesian is relatively similar but translating the English pronoun *you* into Indonesian causes difficulty since both the second person singular and second person plural are written in the same form. Unless we know the context, we will find it difficult to translate, for example, *I would like to invite you to my party next week* into Indonesian since *you* may refer to second person singular or second person plural. Only the context that can help us whether we will translate it into *eng(kau)/saudara, anda* or *kamu* (second person plural).

The same problem will arise in translating the English pronoun *he, she* and *it*. English distinguishes the third person singular based on gender while in Indonesian such distinction is not made. Translating *He was born in 1970 and she was born five years later* into *Dia lahir tahun 1970 dan dia lahir lima tahun kemudian* cannot show the different gender of the two persons. We can, of course, explain the gender of the two persons by adding *laki-laki* and *perempuan* after each of the pronoun but it will sound unnatural in Indonesian as seen next: *Dia*

laki-laki lahir tahun 1970 dan dia perempuan lahir lima tahun kemudian.

Translating the pronoun *it* also causes difficulty. Although there is *itu* in Indonesian which is generally regarded as the equivalent of *it*, using *itu* as the equivalent of *it* in any translated text will result in unnatural Indonesian text. Let us see the following text. *Paman membeli mobil bekas. Itu masih memerlukan repersi.* The use of *itu* to replace *mobil* is seldom made but usually the word *mobil* is repeated as in: *Paman membeli mobil. Mobil itu masih memerlukan reperasi.* It seems that the frequency of use of pronoun is higher in English than in Indonesian. In Indonesian repetition of the same word is preferred to using a pronoun as seen in the short text below.

Membuat **GBPP** seperti yang telah Anda lakukan akan sangat membantu Anda dalam mengajar. Tetapi sebagian pengajar menganggap **GBPP** yang sangat sederhana itu masih belum cukup. Mereka berpendapat bahwa **GBPP** itu seyog-yanya dilengkapi komponen-komponen lain

We can see that *GBPP* is repeated twice in the text.

In English, generally when the writer/speaker refers to a word which has been mentioned previously, he will use a pronoun; as seen in the text to follow.

The United States has *a written constitution* which sets out the principles of government. **It** was drawn up in 1787 and has so far been changed or ammended twenty-six times.

We notice that the writer uses the *it* when referring to *written constitution*.

Indonesian has two forms of the second person plural, that is, *kami* and *kita*. When *kami* is used, the speaker does not include his listener(s) in his group and when *kita* is used he includes his listener(s) in his group. English has only one form, that is, *we*. In English *we* means 'I and you'. Thus, *we* is equivalent to *kami* but not to *kita*. So, the pronoun *kita* of Indonesian is untranslatable into English. For a more detailed explanation

of the dissimilarities between English and Indonesian system of pronoun, see Catford (1965: 44-46).

5.2 Tenses

That English is a temporal language and Indonesian is a non-temporal language is fully realized by Indonesian speakers. And in learning English, they cannot avoid making serious mistakes of using tenses.

Although there are no tenses in Indonesian, some English tenses can be translated into Indonesian without losing any components of meaning of the SLT. Consider the two sentences below with their translation.

Mr Smith went to Japan for business yesterday.

Bapak Smith pergi ke Jepang untuk urusan bisnis kemarin.

Jane is reading a novel now.

Jane sedang membaca novel.

The use of the adverb of time *kemarin* and *sedang* is sufficient to explain the past and the progressive tenses. However, since the English tense system is so complex, not every kind of the tenses corresponds to Indonesian sentence. The two English sentences below are not fully translatable into Indonesian.

By nine o'clock tonight I will be watching TV at home (Future Progressive). If it is translated into :

Pada pukul sembilan nanti malam saya *akan sedang* menonton TV

It sounds unnatural Indonesian sentence since classifying time into *akan sedang* is rarely heard in the language. Generally Indonesian speakers/writers use only *sedang*. But the use of *sedang* only will lose a component of meaning of the SLT.

Another example of untranslatable tense of English into Indonesian is the future perfect tense.

I will already have finished reading the book before due date.

Again a translation such as

Saya *akan telah selesai* membaca buku itu sebelum waktu pengembalian.

will sound unnatural. And a common translation such as

Saya *akan selesai* membaca buku itu sebelum waktu pengembalian will lose one component of meaning retained in the SLT. Some other kinds of English tenses may cause similar translation problems into Indonesian since, as mentioned before, the system of tenses in English is so complex.

5.3 Number

The use of number is commonly shown explicitly in English sentences but it seems it is not in Indonesian. For English speakers it is not easy or may be unable to guess the number of the car Pak Hamid has in the Indonesian sentence below.

Karena harga BBM yang semakin melambung Pak Hamid terpaksa menjual mobilnya.

because the number is not shown. It is not shown whether Pak Hamid sold his only car or more than one car he has. Even for Indonesian speakers it must be ambiguous. Structurally the possibility of selling his only car or more than one of his cars is equal. But since the majority of car owners in the country has only one car (possessing more than one car is not common at least at the moment. Only those who are economically advanced are able to buy and operate more than one car). Indonesian speakers may conclude that Pak Hamid's car is only one. In contrast, possessing more than one car is common in British society.

In English since number must be explicitly shown, we find no difficulty to know the meaning of the two sentences below.

Pak Hamid has sold his car.

Pak Hamid has sold his cars.

The first shows that the car is singular because there is no plural marker while the second is plural as shown by the presence of the plural marker "s".

6. GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES

Geographical condition of one region, as we experience, is related to the climate of the region and to the kinds of plants growing and the kinds of animals living at the region. In some countries like the United States, Canada, European countries, some parts of Australia, Asia and Africa there are four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. In Indonesia and other tropical countries, there are no such kinds of season but dry and wet (rainy) seasons. It means that none of the four seasons of the non-tropical countries corresponds to Indonesian's. So, how does, for example, one translate *autumn* into Indonesian? Of course, the equivalent which is commonly made is *musim gugur/rontok*. But how can an Indonesian who has never experienced such season imagine the situation? He can only create a picture of certain situation in his mind and the picture can be right or wrong.

The same is true for certain plants, vegetables, fruits and animals. For example, kiwi fruit, peach, plum are known only by certain class of people in Indonesia for they do not grow and they are not sold either in every market of Indonesia. So, for a lot of Indonesians they cannot imagine the shape, the colour and the taste of those fruits because they have never seen them. Conversely, tropical fruits like *salak*, *langsat*, *durian* and other tropical fruits are unknown to many Europeans and Americans for the same reason. And *kangaroo*, an animal that is specific to Australia is still unknown to many Indonesians. Thus, translating names of season, plants, vegetables and animals that are specific to one region may cause problems. It is not as easy and practical as translating name of an item which is found in both regions of the SLT and TLT as *pineapple* or *cucumber* that can be found in English and Indonesian regions.

7. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

7.1 Kinship Terms

It is widely known that kinship terms used in one culture may vary from those used in another as between English and Indonesian cultures. Even between two sub-cultures in the same country the differences may occur as between Javanese and Batakese cultures.

Although most of English kinship terms can be translated into Indonesian, but the term used referring to one's father's brother is not similar in both cultures. In Indonesian there are two terms referring to *uncle*. The term *uak* is used when the uncle is older than one's father and *paman/pakcik* is used when the uncle is younger. On the other hand, English does not make such distinction. So translating: *This ring was given by my uncle* into *Cincin ini diberikan paman saya* can be accurate if it is his/her younger uncle who gave the ring but it is a false translation if it is an older uncle. The translator should be concerned with the age of the uncle since the distinction between *uak* and *pakcik* is so important in Indonesian culture.

7.2 Differences of Social Status between Males and Females

Normally in almost all social activities and institutions men are placed in superior positions in Indonesian culture. Women are less often given responsibility to undertake important positions or jobs except indoors activities such as cooking, household management, or child care. In heterosexual relations women are also in the passive position while men are in the active position. It is culturally unacceptable to say in Indonesian, for example, *Ibu Khadijah terlihat terlalu muda dibanding suaminya. Dia menikahi Pak rahmad ketika dia baru berumur enam belas tahun*. In the text, *ibu Khadijah* as a woman takes an active role (married her husband) while her husband takes a passive role (married by her wife). This is contrary to Indonesian culture. In English both *John married Mary* or *Mary married John* are equally acceptable, since both male and female may take an active role. So, it is not easy for a translator to translate, for example, *Helen has got married twice. She married her first husband*

in 1980. After the death of her husband in 1990 she married another man again two years later. If the translator puts Helen into passive position as *Helen telah menikah dua kali. Dia dinikahi suaminya yang pertama pada tahun 1980. setelah kematian suaminya pada tahun 1990, dia dinikahi kembali oleh seorang pria lain* would be culturally acceptable, but in a translation such as this, according to Machali (1998: 134) the meaning of the original has been distorted.

7.3 Naming and Addressing People

It seems that both Englishmen and Indonesians (but not of all ethnic groups) have different perspective on the function of a person's name. The natives of Britain usually have more than one name (given and family name). The given name is used in informal situations while the family name is used in formal situations. The use of a name which is not appropriate to the situation may offend an Englishman. For example, *Allan Smith* is addressed as *Allan* in a formal occasion like a conference by a speaker or as *Smith* in an informal occasion like a market by a friend of his. In contrast, in general a name for Indonesians, although not all, is just an identity. Although many people have more than one name but either the first or the second name can be used except in an official text like a birth certificate where the complete name must be written. Unlike Englishmen who have at least two names with different function, Indonesians prefer calling a friend's first name to the second or family name. for example, Akbar is more widely known than Tanjung of Akbar Tanjung (the ex-head of Indonesian House of representative), or Megawati is more popular than Soekarnoputri (the ex-president of Indonesia). Even the second name is rarely heard. So, sometimes we can hear wrong addresses made by Indonesians to Englishmen in a formal situation like a seminar by mentioning the title Mr or Mrs in front of the person's first name only which, of course, may offend the owner of the name.

7.4 Certain Things Have Important Cultural Values

It is not uncommon that a certain thing has an important cultural value in a society; while in another society although the thing is available but has no special cultural value. For example, for some ethnic groups in Indonesia sticky rice (pulut) has a certain cultural value. In Mandailing society, for example, before an important traditional agreement is made as in accepting a marriage proposal cooked sticky rice (sometimes mixed with tumeric powder so that it becomes yellow) with cooked grated coconut with palm sugar is served to the participants of the occasion. Since the nature of the rice family grain is glutinous, it symbolizes glue that can join all the participants to arrive at a common agreement. so, translating *Sebelum upacara akad nikah dilaksanakan terlebih dahulu pulut kuning dihadirkan kepada hadirin* into *Before the wedding ceremony was held yellow sticky rice was served to the participants*, the English readers will only catch the literal meaning of the yellow sticky rice while its cultural meaning contained in the sticky rice is not caught.

The other things may cause similar translation problems like *keris* in Javanese society, or *ulos* in Toba Batak society since they contain cultural symbols.

Finally, it is worth-noting that there can be different perspective on the same thing by different people of different culture possibly it is due to their closeness to the thing. For example, rice is the staple diet for most Indonesians. It is served three times a day. May be their close relationship to the thing enables them to identify the rice into at least four types: *nasi* 'cooked rice', *beras* 'uncooked husked rice', *padi/gabah* 'uncooked unhusked rice' and *menir* 'broken rice as a result of grinding or the husk removal'. Thus, as Machali says (1988:13) there is no one-to-one correspondence between the word *rice* in English and in Indonesian. Therefore, the translation of *Paman saya berjualan padi* into *My uncle sells rice* is not an accurate translation since the word *padi* cannot be translated into just *rice*.

There must be other words and expressions which are both partially and

totally untranslatable from English into Indonesian or from Indonesian into English in addition to those described above.

8. CONCLUSION

As rendering the meaning of a text in a source language into a target language translating is not always an easy job. It needs the translator's great care. A careful translator should not just search for linguistic equivalents in the target language for a linguistically correct translator is not always culturally acceptable. If the aim of translation is to render the meaning of the text in the source language into the target language that will read like an original text, the translator should pay considerable attention to the cultural differences of the users of the source and the target language.

However, an ideal translation is unlikely to be achieved in every work of translation since a concept or a thing that exists in the source language may not exist in the target language or the same thing may exist in both languages but the speakers of each language have different perspective on the thing.

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