

# The Pragmatics of Intercultural Mediation in Translation

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at translation as a product of intercultural mediation. It explores possibilities of using pragmatic equivalence theory in situations where literal renderings become untenable. As such, the importance of understanding linguistic and cultural givens of the source text in order to reformulate them pragmatically in the target text is highlighted by looking at the nexus existing between culture, language and translation. The disconcerting spate of mistranslations born out of attempts to translate the translation corpus literally underlines the need for an alternative translation method-sense for sense. And the latter is actualised by having recourse to pragmatic equivalences. It is clear from the renderings elicited that professional translators need to be more concerned with building meaning in their renderings. The translations proposed actually show that the translation task has been satisfactorily discharged. Lastly, the renderings elicited also show that pragmatic renderings are products of mediation between two cultures.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural mediation ; culture ; language ; translation ; communication.*

## Résumé

Le présent article considère la traduction comme un produit de la médiation interculturelle. Il explore la possibilité de recourir à la théorie de l'équivalence pragmatique face aux limites de la traduction littérale. Il souligne l'importance de comprendre les éléments linguistiques et culturels du texte de départ en vue de leurs reformulations pragmatiques dans le texte cible. De ce fait, il met en exergue la corrélation entre la culture, la langue et la traduction. La récurrence déconcertante de traductions erronées s'explique par la propension à la traduction littérale des textes. D'où la nécessité d'une méthode alternative de traduction, à savoir sens pour sens. Cette méthode est actualisée par le recours aux équivalences pragmatiques. Il est clair, au regard de la piètre qualité de nombreuses traductions, que les traducteurs professionnels doivent privilégier le sens dans leur rendu. Les traductions proposées montrent que le traducteur s'est acquitté de sa tâche de manière satisfaisante. Par ailleurs, elles confirment que la traduction pragmatique est un produit de la médiation entre deux cultures.

**Mots clés:** *médiation interculturelle ; culture ; langage ; traduction ; communication.*

## INTRODUCTION

The pragmatics of intercultural mediation in translation focuses on meaning derived from the communication context of two languages in contact. Intercultural mediation is, in the reasoning of Katan (2013, p. 89), "inherent in any act of communication across cultures..." This means that intercultural mediation is a particular kind of mediation that gives expression to a translated corpus since the latter makes it possible for culture-specific perspectives to be upheld and respected across cultural and linguistic boundaries. It is in this way that cultural perspectives are transferred across linguistic and cultural boundaries. As such, a translation is ipso facto a particular kind of cross-cultural communication. It is through it that the translator gets rid of linguistic and cultural barriers to render textual knowledge in a foreign language accessible to the target language culture. It is worthy to note that a group or people exude their cultural identity through the language they speak which, in turn, is an expression of their culture and the latter is a function of the group's environment, history and social reality. Pragmatically speaking, language and culture subsume

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utterances. As such, languages and translations are products of cultural and intercultural communication endeavours respectively.

### **CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION**

As the totality of norms and conventions governing social behaviour, culture includes language (Vermeer, 1992) and actually precedes language or, to be more precise, language development via standardisation. And since the existence of multiple linguistic communities with their corresponding cultures prompted the need for communication between social cultures, translation emerged as an answer to the need. Hence, since language and culture are intertwined, it is evident that a translation which is an interlinguistic and inherently an intercultural driven endeavour is a function of and conditioned by the different languages and cultures in contact. As Vermeer (1992, p. 38) points out, “although translation in its ordinary sense is generally thought of as a (primarily) linguistic transfer process, it is, as such, at the same time a cultural process because language is part of culture”. It is for the same reason that Bassnett (2002, p. 22) asserts that “the translator treats the text in isolation from culture at his peril”. All these insights project a translation as a form of intercultural expression in the same way that a language is a form of a people’s cultural expression. Hence, while language is seen as a culture-specific subset that gives expression to a people’s cultural outlook, a translation is seen as an intercultural-specific textual subset produced by echoing the textual form of social culture-A which has been acceptably naturalised in textual form in social culture-B. As such, a translation is the outcome of a pragmatic grasp of the linguistic and cultural givens of the source text which are, in turn, transformed into linguistic and cultural givens of the target text for corresponding linguistic and cultural ends.

In this wise, even translation studies is now moving from a language-centred perspective to a culture-centred one from which translation is seen as a social practice and an interactive transfer. Now, since text production and text reception always depend on the culture of a communication community, translators can only mediate satisfactorily between source text producers and the receptor communities if they use the latter’s languages in strict respect of attendant conventions. Such is Bhabha’s (2004) justification for pointing out that the existence of the same word in different languages should not prompt the translator to take the meaning of such a word for granted in a different language. According to Bhabha (2004, p.162):

In the restless drive for cultural translation, hybrid sites of meaning open up a cleavage in the language of culture which suggest that the similitude of the symbol as it plays across cultural sites must not obscure the fact that repetition of the sign is, in each specific social practice, both different and differential.

This means that it behoves the translator to take cognisance of discrepancies between the language use situation of the source text and acceptable use of language for the information content in the target language for translational ends. This is because “what has value as a sign in one cultural community may be devoid of significance in another and it is the translator who is uniquely placed to identify the disparity and seek to resolve it” (Hatim and Mason, 1990, p. 224). So as a cross-contextualisation of language use with attendant sites of meaning, a translation is, accordingly, a product of culture-transfer, reflecting the translator’s pragmatism in embedding the receptor language with cultural sites of meaning.

### **INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION AND PRAGMATIC USE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE**

There is no doubt that the translator’s pragmatic use of the target culture’s language hinges on a befitting understanding of the situation or context of language use in the source text plus the translator’s leverage of his/her knowledge of the target language for translational ends. What is more, an understanding of a given language use situation in the source text has to be matched with the ability to circumvent source text-specific difficulties or to interpret hidden meanings (Beaugrande and Dressler in Katan (2013)) in the pre-translational process. The meanings thus interpreted are then factored in a translation. Clearly, circumventing source text-specific difficulties and unearthing hidden meanings are two possible avenues for mediating between two cultures and building meaning in the target text. This is a clear indication that the difficulties associated with intercultural communication are sociolinguistic because communication is mediated by language, the culture of words and concepts as well as the inputs of semantics and pragmatics. It is through such multiple considerations that an interpretation of source text utterances that tends to precede their translation can be construed in order to put the rules of sociolinguistics into use in one’s translational endeavour.

For translators to play their role as intercultural mediators, they have to elicit renderings that reflect source text utterances objectively as per the permutations of translation. In this way, the translator has to decide to either opt for loan words or coin new words according to the linguistic conventions of the target language. More importantly, the loans or neologisms have to be used in an intelligible manner for the target audience to comprehend and know what

it would have been ignorant of without translation, especially as translations tend to enrich a language or a culture with new information. As a result, the invariable facets of intercultural mediation from the pragmatic point of view are intelligibility, comprehensibility and knowledgeability or knowledge value of the resulting translation.

In this wise, the early history of translation into English is there to enlighten us vis-à-vis the use of loan words or adaptation of newly coined words to the rhetoric of the target language. In essence, we all know how the generous use of Latin expressions in the translations of Geoffrey Chaucer was disapproved by his English audience. Besides, what the English language has become is, generally, defined by words that are coined according to the demands of its rhetoric with instances of loans, where necessary. This means that the use of words from African languages in other languages such as English, French, German, Italian, etc. or the use of loan words from English, French, German, etc. in African languages has to be construed from the prism of intelligibility, comprehensibility and knowledge value.

Intelligibility has to do with eliciting renderings that are intelligible, i.e., renderings that make sense and have a logical frame encompassing cohesive and coherent trappings that render their reading fluid. Comprehensibility is first of all tacit, encapsulating the quality of a translation that is readily comprehended without recourse to the source text. Comprehensibility is also enhanced when the language use situation of the source text renders the translator's interpretation of source text utterances plus corresponding permutations in the target text comprehensible. Comprehensibility may also mean that the creativity employed to embed the translation with, at least, the closest meaning of the source text, by using loanwords and footnotes for example, is acceptable. Comprehensibility may even entail the naturalisation of a loan term or culture-specific expression by adopting and adapting its meaning to the textual situation for translational ends. In summation, comprehensibility refers to the overall metamorphosis undergone by the source text in the translation process for the production of acceptable renderings which then become valid and only comprehensible from the translational point of view. As regards the knowledge value, it is crystal clear that an intelligible translation has to be cohesive with coherent trappings or an internal logic that is comprehensible from the point of view of the source text. And a target text that is comprehensible in this way will also embed source text knowledge to be accessed by the target readership. It is in this sense that translation incarnates knowledge transfer as well as language use transfer between two cultures.

To better factor in the invariable facets of intelligibility, comprehensibility and knowledge value, intercultural mediators who, in the context of this paper, are translators need to:

- construe the language use situation of any given source text utterance properly before exploring their linguistic knowledge of the target language and using the latter in a situation that meets the expectations of the target readership;
- assimilate the cultural expression of the source language in question for its reformulation in the target language as per the latter's linguistic conventions in such an intelligible manner as to facilitate understanding and provide knowledge that would otherwise remain inaccessible without translation.

It should be noted that mediating cultural differences through pragmatic language use in the target culture entails establishing what is identical to dissimilar cultural expressions or to "non-converging world views" (Katan, 2013, p. 85) in order to render communication acceptable to both communities. For example, the expression "À sange" (which literally means "it's day break") as used by Akose speakers (the Bakossi ethnic group in Cameroon speaks Akose) is identical to "Good morning" as used by English speakers in terms of the situation of language use. In other words, the identical language use situation is morning greeting and this is what (Katan, 2013) perceives as the association of meaning in a text to its cultural context. It is the said association of textual meaning to the context of culture that resulted in the acceptance of "À sange" as an equivalent greeting to "Good morning" in English. It is, therefore, clear that equivalence is not established at the level of the content since culture basically means difference and those who use "À sange" in the morning to greet are telling one another that "it's day break", which implies "we'll see what the day holds in store for us". Conversely, those who use "Good morning" as a greeting in the morning intend to wish you well in the morning even though such a wish is sometimes followed by the death of a loved one. But since such a stroke of misfortune does not occur every day, the wishful greeting is also justified. As Pym (2010, p. 6) succinctly puts it, "equivalence does not say that languages are the same; it just says that values can be the same." In the opinion of Pym (2010, p. 8), it is right to consider "À sange" as the equivalent of "Good morning" because "À sange" and "Good morning" "activate approximately the same cultural function."

On the basis of the foregoing, intercultural mediation from the pragmatic point of view of translation entails:

- translation of the communicative intention of the source text utterance;
- reformulation of culture-specific expressions in the source language text in strict respect of target language conventions;

- recognition of nonconverging world views of the two linguistic communities by factoring them in a translation to create room for both communities to accommodate each other;
- the association of meaning to the cultural context in order to establish an equivalent situation, albeit devoid of the same content, for communication purposes.

The abridged translated corpus below gives a practical dimension to the pragmatics of intercultural mediation in translation as set out in this article. The translation of a text on the transition to multi-party democracy in Senegal and in Cameroon by Professor Abe Claude shows how the translator gets rid of barriers to access difficult source text utterances and renders them accessible to the target audience. The source text is French and is labelled from 1F to 14F while the target text is English and is labelled from 1E to 14E. The French excerpt is translated chronologically to show clearly that the translator can never shy away from the complexity of texts to be translated.

**1F** Multiplication de l'offre partisane et renouvellement des élites politiques durant le printemps de l'Afrique: regard croisé sur la subjectivation politique de la société civile au Sénégal et au Cameroun

**1E** The multiplicity of political parties and the emergence of a new political elite during the African spring: a cross-examination of the political subjectivity of the civil society in Senegal and Cameroon.

**2F** La présente articulation apporte la preuve de la coïncidence du temps politique sénégalais et de celui camerounais au moment de la remise en cause des régimes autoritaires dans l'optique de l'amorce du processus de démocratisation dans chacune de ces situations pourtant différentes par la nature des ordres gouvernants ayant précédé cette mutation.

**2E** This section shows that the political calendar of Senegal and that of Cameroon coincided when the existence of their authoritarian regimes was questioned by their citizenry in order to initiate a democratic process from the disparate political situation that brought about a democratic transition in the two countries.

**3F** 1.1 Réinvention de la société politique, ouverture au multipartisme et renouvellement des élites gouvernantes au Cameroun: la société civile dans le tournant libéral de la décennie 90.

**3E** 1.1 Reorganisation of the political regime, opening up to multi-party politics and emergence of a new governing elite in Cameroon: the civil society and political liberalisation in the 1990s.

**4F** L'analyse de l'histoire socio-politique du Cameroun qui a marqué les premières années de la décennie 90 atteste que les événements qui l'ont structurée ont conduit à un retour d'initiative de la société qui s'est accompagné d'importantes incidences politiquement symboliques et structurelles.

**4E** An analysis of the socio-political history of Cameroon in the early 1990s shows that the developments that shaped that history led the citizenry to begin to take initiatives again and the political ramifications of the initiatives were symbolic and structural.

**5F** A la lumière de cette interrogation, l'on découvre que ce retour d'initiative a fonctionné comme un processus de subversion de la logique fonctionnelle de l'ordre mono partisan et qu'elle constitue dans ce sens une dynamique d'incorporation du politique aux pratiques sociales ne s'avouant pourtant pas politique dans leur nature, leur initiative ou leur intention. Pour ce faire, trois considérations sont à prendre en compte ici.

**5E** Having questioned the existence of the authoritarian regime plus the fact that the citizenry began taking initiatives again was, based on the operational logic of the one-party system of government, seen as a form of subversion. As a result, it was incorporated exclusively into the practices of the civil society and had no political dimension. Three examples will suffice to show how that was to be achieved.

**6F** D'abord la valeur structurante et symbolique de ces événements. L'on découvre aisément à l'analyse que l'autonomisation de la société vis-à-vis de l'Etat a constitué une dynamique décisive de dissidence face à la situation de contrôle politique accentué sur fond de processus d'émasculation et d'assujettissement dans laquelle se trouvait le corps social camerounais tout entier sous le régime du parti unique; situation qui commandait la totalisation de l'ordre social jusqu'à fusion avec le pouvoir d'Etat.

**6E** In the first place, these developments were structural and symbolic, especially as it is clear from their analysis that clamouring for autonomy in favour of segments of society was seen as dissent by the government in the authoritarian context that prevailed and which was further compounded by the emasculation and subjection of Cameroonians under the one-party dictatorship-a situation in which totalitarian methods subsumed under State authority thrived.

**7F** Par ailleurs, dans ce contexte, une telle dynamique prend une valeur symbolique dont la portée n'a d'égal que la disposition à produire et articuler une opinion différente de celle des gouvernants en place qu'elle rend possible au sein de la société.

**7E** Secondly, the symbolic importance of the developments was such that it was possible to articulate views that were different from those of government authorities.

**8F** Et dans ce sens, elle introduit de facto ses acteurs dans le champ des préoccupations politiques. Finalement, ce retour de l'initiative autonome de la part des acteurs sociaux organise un processus de politisation de la société qui, désormais, n'hésite plus à prendre ouvertement position sur la gestion des affaires publiques au point d'exiger une mutation de l'ordre public dans le sens de la libéralisation et de l'ouverture démocratique.

**8E** These developments were also important as they aroused, de facto, the interest of Cameroonians in politics. Finally, renewed aspirations for autonomy by politicians contributed in politicising Cameroonians who, henceforth, could promptly take a clear stance on the conduct of public affairs and even dare to demand a change of the political regime to pave the way for liberalisation and democratisation.

**9F** Pour comprendre la portée de ce processus d'émancipation de la société vis-à-vis de l'Etat au Cameroun, il est important de rappeler le rapport de domesticité ou de familiarité qui existait entre ces deux entités sous le régime mono partisan.

**9E** To understand how separating the civil society from the State was important in Cameroon, it is worthy to note that the two entities were inseparable under the one-party system of government.

**10F** Le projet de construction de l'Etat-nation au Cameroun était alors de type jacobin. Au nom de ce jacobinisme, toute affirmation de la différence était vue par le pouvoir d'Etat comme une subversion, une atteinte grave, à l'endroit de l'ordre établi. A titre d'illustration, ledit projet se voulait ethnocidaire pendant que d'autres partis politiques que l'Union Nationale Camerounaise (UNC) étaient proscrits et les forces sociales réduites au statut d'instruments de renforcement de l'hégémonie du régime (M. D. Ebolo, 1999 :71)

**10E** The objective of building a nation-State in Cameroon was predicated on Jacobinism. In the name of the latter, any dissenting voice was regarded by government authorities as subversion-a serious affront to the established order. For example, the Jacobin-like society was designed to stifle ethnic affiliations as political parties other than the Cameroon National Union (CNU) were prohibited and civil society representatives became instruments for consolidating the authoritarian regime (M. D. Ebolo, 1999:71).

**11F** C'est dans ce sens que l'éclosion des rivalités locales à caractère communautariste que l'on a observé sur la place publique à l'aube de la décennie 90 dans le champ social camerounais, c'est-à-dire en plein régime d'étouffement des différences sociales, peut s'appréhender comme une dynamique d'émancipation de la société à l'égard de l'Etat et tout particulièrement du projet monopolistique qu'il met en œuvre depuis septembre 1966, date d'institutionnalisation de fait du parti unique au Cameroun.

**11E** It is in this way that local and community-based rivalries emerged in public affairs in Cameroon in the early 1990s. In other words, the stifling of dissenting voices during the regime's heyday can be seen as a catalyst to developments that culminated in the separation of the civil society from the government and, in particular, from the one-party dictatorship introduced in September 1966 –the date the one-party system was, de facto, institutionalised in Cameroon.

**12F** Il ne s'agit pas pour nous de nier le caractère intolérant des modes d'affirmations qui prennent le primordialisme comme référentiel, mais d'examiner leur productivité sur le projet hégémonique alors en vigueur au moment de l'amorce de la libéralisation politique.

**12E** Our task is not to deny the fact that there was a general outcry against multi-party politics at the time since the one-party system of government had become the model. Our task is to examine how that impacted the quest to sustain the authoritarian government at the onset of political liberalisation.

**13F** Dans ce contexte, non seulement l'inscription du primordialisme dans le champ politique ne relève plus du monopole de l'Etat, mais en plus, son énonciation prend le contre-pied du discours jacobin pourfendu par lui : « elle est impulsée de manière concurrente par des acteurs politiques et sociaux plus ou moins autonomes » (L. Sindjoun, 1998 :9)

**13E** In this regard, not only did the government refrain from using the one-party machinery as a political instrument to monopolise government business, even its discourse departed from the Jacobinism it represented: “it inadvertently changed its stance because of demands from rival and more or less politically autonomous civil society representatives” (L. Sindjoun, 1998:9).

**14F** En cette période où les langues se délient de plus en plus pour revendiquer l'avènement d'un Etat de droit démocratique, le pouvoir d'Etat a donc aussi désormais à gérer les multiples clivages intertribaux, ethno-régionaux ou linguistico-culturels qui fragmentent le champ social en couples d'adversaires et portent un coup en plein cœur du projet hégémonique à l'œuvre au Cameroun depuis près qu'un quart de siècle (1966-1990).

**14E** As the people increasingly clamoured for a democratic state where there is the rule of law at that time, government authorities had to also handle numerous inter-tribal, ethno-regional, linguistic and cultural hiccups that left Cameroon fragmented into conflict-prone areas, each with two opposing camps, which emasculated the authoritarian regime, albeit in its heyday, that had been existing in Cameroon for nearly a quarter of a century (1966-1990).

It can be discerned from the above translation that an acceptable interpretation of a source text utterance subsumes the translator's pragmatic use of TL as follows: “renouveau des élites politiques” when interpreted becomes “emergence of a new political elite”; “au moment de la remise en cause des régimes autoritaires” becomes “when the existence of their authoritarian regimes was questioned by their citizenry”; “dans l'optique de l'amorce du processus de démocratisation dans chacune de ces situations pourtant différentes par la nature des ordres gouvernantes ayant précédé cette mutation” becomes “in order to initiate a democratic process from the disparate political situation that brought about a democratic transition in the two countries”; “A la lumière de cette interrogation, l'on découvre que ce retour d'initiative a fonctionné comme un processus de subversion de la logique fonctionnelle de l'ordre mono partisan” becomes “Having questioned the existence of the authoritarian regime plus the fact that the citizenry began taking initiatives again was, based on the operational logic of the one-party system of government, seen as a form of subversion”; “situation de contrôle politique” becomes “in the authoritarian context that prevailed”; “situation qui commandait la totalisation de l'ordre social jusqu'à fusion avec le pouvoir d'Etat” becomes “a situation in which authoritarian methods subsumed under State authority thrived”; “ce retour de l'initiative autonome de la part des acteurs sociaux organise un processus de politisation de la société” becomes “renewed aspirations for autonomy by politicians contributed in politicising Cameroonians”.

The difference between the above portions of French utterances and the remainder of the French utterances (**9 F-14 F**) is that the entirety of utterances in the latter was interpreted for translational and communication purposes as Charlotte Lee intimates in Clark and Clinton (1994, p. 544):

Interpretation... is primarily concerned with communication. It involves re-creation of literature for an audience. The response which is sought is dictated by the interpreter's task to understand that intention and through understanding, to evoke in others the desired response.

All in all, the above translation vividly illustrates how translators mediate between the source text producer and the target text reader to evoke the desired response in the latter.

## TRANSLATION AS THE OUTCOME OF INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION

Intercultural mediators need to tactfully mediate between the two linguistic communities for communication ends. In translational terms, intercultural mediation, therefore, entails removing barriers to the transfer of cultural propositions from the textual form of one social culture to the textual form of another social culture via pragmatic translation of source text communicative intent and acceptable use of the target language in a translation. As such, the portions of French utterances or the entirety of French utterances translated by dint of a more or less acceptable interpretation subsumed under the style (the way words are put together in written form) used in the target culture's language correspond, in practice, to the cultural sites of meaning in the source text (ST) and target text (TT).

As can be discerned from the translation corpus, intelligible, comprehensible and knowledgeable renderings are invariable facets of the pragmatic method of translation. This is so because the cultural sites of meaning in the TT contribute more to the intelligibility, comprehensibility and knowledge value of TT since they actually show how translation difficulties or communication barriers to information transfer from one linguistic textual form to another linguistic textual form were actually removed. When compared to the source text, the cultural sites of meaning in the target text render the above translation more explicit and, ipso facto, more accessible.

## CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the use of special linguistic and cultural givens of the source text to produce equally special linguistic and cultural givens in its corresponding target text for the information needs of the readership or for communication purposes is ocular proof of intercultural mediation in translation. Intercultural mediation in translation revolves around pragmatic equivalences and culture-specific use of the target language to remove barriers to the transfer of textual information to another culture in textual form or to break communication barriers between two cultural communities. The translator's mandate is to mediate between two linguistic communities for communication ends, i.e. pragmatic interpretation of source text communicative intent and pragmatic use of the target language to build meaning in the target text.

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