

Explanatory Notes on the Problems of Equivalence in the Translation of Academic Certificates and Diplomas

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss the impact of the multicultural dimension of English on the translation of academic diplomas issued at secondary school level in French-speaking countries. Translators have difficulty in finding the equivalents of the diplomas in English (the target language). The methodology of the paper is both descriptive and comparative. On the one hand, the polycentric nature of the English language is described and its implications for translation are underlined. On the other hand, a comparative approach is used in comparing the diplomas from both linguistic communities. The findings of the paper revealed that translating from the source language (French) into English is both a linguistic and, particularly, a cultural transaction. There are three circles of English in the world, making the search for equivalents particularly complex. Translation under these conditions needs to adopt a functional approach by taking into account the realities of the target language and culture.

1. Introduction

It is a truism that English has become an international language used in many countries around the globe. While some of these countries are the sources of the language, others have inherited it from their colonial masters. There is a third group of countries where English has been introduced in academic institutions and serves as a medium of communication in international relations and business drives.

Kachru (1985) has explained the situation of these three categories of counties in a publication titled *English in the World: Teaching and Learning of Language and Literature*:

The spread of English may be viewed in terms of three concentric circles representing the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages. I have tentatively labelled these: the inner circle, the outer circle (or extended circle), and the expanding circle. In terms of the users, the inner circle refers to the traditional bases of English the regions where it is the primary language the USA [...] the UK [...] Canada [...] Australia [...] and New Zealand [...]. (1985, p. 12)

The second category of countries include Ghana, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica. These countries turned to English at a particular time in their history because of colonisation. The third group of countries, including Japan, China, Korea, etc., use English as a second or foreign language in their universities as well as in international trade and relations.

Due to the polycentric and multicultural nature of English nowadays, translating diplomas and certificates' names into this language has become a challenge. Indeed, the translation of academic diplomas and certificates from French into English poses a number of problems because of the different names given to secondary school diplomas in various English-speaking countries. To be more explicit, there is a lack of uniformity in the names given to these diplomas in English-speaking countries. Under these conditions, translators get lost when they have to give a name to a diploma in English. In other words,

for the same diploma, Ghanaians would use a name that Americans would not use. South Africans would use a name that Jamaicans would not use. However, all the names that are used in each of these countries are part of the repertoire of names available in English. At this stage, translation ceases to be a purely linguistic exercise. It becomes an investigation into cultures and societies. Translators need a standard which is not readily available. A question that every translator is likely to ask is: What is the standard name of this or that diploma in English? Who sets the standard nowadays? Kachru makes another point which hammers home this critical issue:

These three circles, then, bring to English a unique cultural pluralism, and a linguistic heterogeneity and diversity which are unrecorded to this extent in human history. With this diffusion, naturally, come scores of problems concerned with codification, standardization, nativization, teaching, and description and, of course, a multitude of attitudes about recognition of various varieties and *subvarieties*. (Ibid, p. 14)

In a bid to address the question of cultural pluralism, this paper stresses that a translator would translate at his own peril if he did not take into account any specific target language culture. Having said that, it is equally important to point out that translators translating from French or Spanish into German do not face the cultural problems that translators translating from French or German into English face. The multicultural problems are minor in German because this language is spoken in a very few countries in Europe. All German-speaking countries are located in the same geographic area and their culture is almost the same. Therefore, when you have to translate a diploma into German, the name you give it is likely to be the same in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Unlike German, English is a language that is common to many nations and many cultures scattered all over the globe.

On this score, Reiß and Vermeer (2014, p. 24) explain - in section 2.5.1 *Cultural aspects of translation* of their book titled *Theory of Translational Action* - that "A language is part of a culture. Cultures use language as their conventional means of communicating and thinking. Culture encompasses a society's social norms and their expression."

Considering the multicultural dimension of English, it should be possible to paraphrase Reiß and Vermeer by saying that "[English] language is part of many cultures, while German language is part of a culture."

Another point made in this paper is that translators need to know the destination of a particular student in order to adequately translate his/her degree into English. Therefore, knowledge of the target language culture is of paramount importance in translation.

The above-mentioned concerns are the main issues discussed in this paper which has been inspired by a concrete problem that some colleagues of ours were confronted with.

2. Problem Statement and Methodology

2.1 Problem Statement

In some recent meetings of translators, some colleagues informed us that sometimes some of the diplomas that they translate for students travelling to foreign countries to further their studies are returned to them because academic institutions of the host countries are not familiar with the names and titles they write on students' diplomas and certificates. This apparently banal problem casts doubts on translators' competence and prevents students from getting admission to foreign academic institutions. However, when you look at this problem with an insider's view, you quickly realise that it is not due to translators' incompetence; it is rather due to a lack of one standard in English and to the absence of a functionalist approach to translation.

To address this problem, this paper adopts the following methodology.

2.2 Methodology

This paper adopts two approaches, namely a descriptive approach and a comparative one.

The latter compares different names given to the same diplomas in various English-speaking countries. This approach is useful in pinpointing a serious academic problem and in advocating a repertoire of diplomas and degrees available in all countries where English is one of the languages of instruction.

The former approach, i.e. the descriptive approach, describes the global spread of English and the categories of countries where it is used. This approach is equally important because it sheds light on the multicultural and international dimension of the English language. The situation it depicts is that of one target language and several target cultures.

3. Results

- a. There are three categories of English-speaking countries in the world and each of these countries contributes its culture and peculiarities to this global linguistic community.
- b. There is an inextricable link between translation and culture.
- c. The difficulty in finding cross-cultural names for degrees and certificates translated into English highlights the problems of equivalence in translation.
- d. There is a need to adopt a functionalist approach to the translation of academic diplomas. Indeed, one of the central issues in the functionalist school of translation is its orientation toward the target language culture.

4. Theoretical Framework and Discussion

4.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper focuses on the theories developed by several authors including Kachru, Susan Bassnett, House, Katharina Reiß and Hans Vermeer.

It has already been mentioned that Kachru has explained the worldwide spread of the English language in three categories of countries. Consequently, each of these countries develops its own standards. That is the point Kachru has raised in the following quotation:

What further complicates the task is the sheer magnitude of the spread of English, the variety of global contexts in which English is used and the varied motivations for its acquisition and use in the erstwhile colonial regions after the political phase of the Colonial Period. There are also some who believe the Post-Colonial Period has ushered in a phase of decontrol of English, as it were, from earlier, reasonably well-accepted standards. The impression now is that with the diffusion of and resultant innovations in English around the world, universally acceptable standards are absent. (Kachru, op. cit., pp. 11-12)

Through the quotation above, Kachru contributes two fundamental ideas to this paper, namely the lack of universally acceptable standards due to the sheer magnitude of the spread of English and the three categories of countries that use this language.

Equally important is Katharina Reiß's and Hans Vermeer's Skopos theory and its functionalist approach to translation. These two authors have summarised the Skopos theory as follows:

4.2 Summary of the theoretical groundwork

The groundwork behind our general theory of translational action consists of three assumptions which, as we shall see later, are hierarchically linked in the following order:

(1) $TA = f(sk)$

A translational action is a function of its *skopos*.

(2) $TA = IOT (IOS)$

A translational action is an offer of information produced in a target culture and language about an offer of information produced in a source culture and language.

(3) $TA \subseteq IOS \times IOT$

The target information offer is represented as a transfer which simulates a source information offer. The simulation is not biuniquely reversible. A narrower culture-specific version of this claim is that a target offer of information is a transfer which imitates a source offer of information.

Note that we speak of 'a' source offer and 'a' target offer, both of which represent only one out of an indefinite number of potential offers. (With regard to the use of these pseudo-formulas (Reiß & Vermeer, op cit, p. 94)

It needs to be made clear that what these authors call a translational action is translation as a human action that thus possesses intention. Translation is done to achieve a purpose and should always aim at a target audience or culture. That is the 'Skopos theory', which means purpose. Translation is done from a source language and culture into a target language and culture. Translation into a target culture may undergo modifications and changes due to the target language and culture realities. Translation is referred to here as simulation and imitation.

This functionalist theory is a major trend that prominent translation theorists like Eugene Nida have advocated. Indeed, Nida's *Dynamic Equivalence* theory advocates the functionalist approach. Earlier in the history of translation, another term, i.e. foreignisation, was used to describe the target culture orientation of translation.

Susan Bassnett's contribution to this discussion is her statement on the link between translation and culture as well as the problems of equivalence in translation.

Equally important in this discussion is House's ideas related to the link between translation and culture.

In the following section, the ideas and theories developed by these authors will be discussed in greater detail.

5. Discussion

5.1 *The three categories of English-speaking countries in the world*

In elaborating on the idea of the three concentric circles of English, Kachru has stressed the importance of English in several of the outer circle countries. In some of these countries, e. g. in Nigeria, it has become the official language. In Singapore, it is a major language of government, the legal system and education. In India, English is, according to the Constitution, an associate official language.

The third category of English-speaking countries is expanding rapidly and new varieties of English have emerged in the form of EFL – English as a Foreign Language. "This circle is currently expanding rapidly and has resulted in numerous performance (or EFL) varieties of English (Kachru and Quirk, 1981)." (Kachru, op. cit., p. 13)

After presenting the three groups of countries, Kachru makes "a distinction between speech community and speech fellowship as originally suggested by Firth (1959: 208)." A speech fellowship brings users closer than a speech community which is larger. Another important point made in Kachru's paper is that "English ceases to be an exponent of only one culture the Western Judaeo-Christian culture." (Ibid, p. 20)

It was important to briefly present the international and multicultural background of English, the target language of this paper. The conclusion that can be drawn is that English is used by many different ethnic groups in many religious, geographic, political and economic circles. It has generated variants all over the world because some ethnic groups mix it with their own languages.

5.2 *The inextricable link between translation and culture*

Translation is not only a linguistic exercise but it is also an incursion into another culture. Several authors including Katharina Reiß and Hans Vermeer as well as Susan Bassnett and House have discussed this issue.

House (2016, p. 40) starts the discussion on the issue of culture by asking a fundamental question: "The question 'what is culture?' can thus be fruitfully extended to 'how does culture affect the construction of meanings in a certain context?'" This question needs to be answered at a later stage when the concept of *primary school* is examined in the South African context.

Furthermore, House underlines that the concept of 'culture' has been the concern of many different disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literature and cultural studies, and the definitions offered in these fields vary according to the particular frame of reference invoked. "Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) collected 156 (!) definitions of culture, and today such a list would undoubtedly be much longer." (Ibid)

On this score, House explains that two basic views of culture have emerged from the above-mentioned definitions: the humanistic concept of culture and the anthropological concept of culture.

The humanistic concept of culture looks at the 'cultural heritage' as a model of refinement, an exclusive collection of a community's masterpieces in literature, fine arts, music etc.

The anthropological concept of culture takes into account the overall way of life of a community or society, i.e. all those traditional, explicit and implicit designs for living which act as potential guides for the behaviour of members of the culture.

House explains that culture in the anthropological sense captures a group's dominant and learned set of habits, as the totality of its non-biological inheritance involves presuppositions, preferences and values – all of which are, of course, neither easily accessible nor verifiable.

In another development, House states that in several linguistic schools of thought, 'culture' has long been seen as intimately linked with language in use. "Thus, for instance, scholars operating in the Prague school of linguistics or inside Firthian-Hallidayan functional-systemic British Contextualism described and explained language as primarily a social phenomenon, which is naturally and inextricably intertwined with culture." (Ibid, p. 44). In these two as well as other socio-linguistically and contextually oriented approaches, language is viewed as embedded in culture such that the meaning of any linguistic item can only be properly understood with reference to the cultural context enveloping it. This is a forceful statement that is reinforced by the following statement by House on translation and culture: "For translation, we need to base our judgements about when and how a 'cultural filter' is to be applied in the process of translation, on serious qualitative ethnographic and contrastive discourse analysis based on detailed micro and macro-contextual analyses. (Ibid, p. 45)

To summarise House's thinking, the following four key points need to be highlighted: (1) The need to understand how culture affects the construction of meanings in a certain context; (2) two basic views of culture have emerged: the humanistic concept of culture and the anthropological concept of culture; (3) any linguistic item can only be properly understood with reference to the cultural context enveloping it; (4) the need to apply a 'cultural filter' in the process of translation.

As indicated above, Susan Bassnett has also discussed the issue of translation and culture. In *Translation Studies*, Bassnett (2002, pp. 22-23) notes that:

Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril.

This is like a piece of advice as well as a warning against every attempt to ignore the cultural dimension of translation. No translator can survive if s/he does not understand both source language and target language cultures.

ReiB & Vermeer (op. cit., p.25) echo this truth when they note that "Translators must therefore know both the source and the target cultures; they must be bicultural. For, in translation, the value of an event, with regard to its nature or its degree or both, may change."

According to Vermeer, norms and conventions are the principal features of a culture and translating is comparing cultures. The translator's cultural background knowledge plays an important role in the success or failure of this comparison. Modifications that occur when elements are transferred from the source text to the target text are appropriate in certain contexts so long as the transferred element possesses the same amount of conventionality in the target culture as the original did in the source culture. In addition, the *skopos* of the translation is determined by a translation brief or translation commission. Thus, it can be seen that although Skopos Theory is more target-oriented, the cultural aspects of both source and target languages play an important role.

In the summary of the Skopos theory, translation is referred to as simulation and imitation. This description reveals the problems that translators encounter in their search for equivalents in the target language.

5.3 Problems of equivalence in translation

Popovič is one of the authors who have discussed the problems of equivalence in translation. This author has distinguished four types of equivalence, including stylistic (translational) equivalence which has been defined as follows: " *Stylistic (translational) equivalence*, where there is 'functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation aiming at an expressive identity with an invariant of identical meaning (Basnett, Ibid, p. 33)

This type of equivalence seems to encapsulate the issue that is being discussed in this paper, i.e. functional equivalence. The table below presents two francophone diplomas and their English equivalents.

Table N° 1: BEPC and BACCALAUREAT and their equivalents

BEPC	UK <i>General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)</i> Key stage 4 (3 ^{ème} & 2 ^{nde} French system)
	Ghana <i>Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE)</i>
	Nigeria <i>Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE)</i>
	South Africa Grade 9
	USA 8th Grade
	Canada GCSE
BACCALAUREAT	UK A' Levels
Bac professionnel	BTEC National Diploma Advanced (NVQ Level 3)
	Ghana <i>West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE)</i>
	Nigeria <i>West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE)/Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE)</i> <i>O' Level</i> A' Level – an exam that enables students to enter university. It is not a degree
	South Africa National Senior Certificate (NSC)
	USA <i>12th Grade or High School Graduation</i>
	English speaking Canada High School Diploma

Source: <https://www.scholaro.com/reports/Credential-Evaluation>

The table above shows differences in the names of the diplomas in the various English-speaking countries. Indeed, while the equivalent of BEPC in Ghana is *Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE)*, in the UK it is called *General Certificate of Secondary Education* and in the US it is called 8th Grade. There are other names for the same diploma in other English-speaking countries. The point this paper is making is as follows: if a translator wants to translate BEPC into English, which denomination does he have to use? Since there is no standard term that is universally acceptable in all English-speaking countries, the translator has to ask whoever has commissioned the work where s/he is going with the diploma. The knowledge of the destination of the student can help the translator to use an appropriate term that will be acceptable in the student's host country.

The same remark is valid for the translation of BACCALAUREAT into English. While the equivalent in Nigeria is *West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE)/Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE)*, in South Africa the term they use is *National Senior Certificate (NSC)*. In other English-speaking countries they use other names.

The various names tell us something about the problems of equivalence in translation. Equivalence is not sameness. There is another problem related to the concepts these terms refer to. Let us now look at a piece of information on the educational system of South Africa.

Table N°2: Education System in South Africa

Primary	Primary School	9
Post-secondary	Higher National Certificate	2
Tertiary	Bachelor's (Arts and Science)	3
Tertiary	Bachelor's Honors	1
Tertiary	Bachelor's (Professional)	4-6

Source: <https://www.scholaro.com/pro/Countries/South-Africa/Education-System>

The first nine years are spent in primary school and another three years are spent in secondary school. Secondary school education starts after nine years of schooling.

Two issues need to be raised at this stage. The first one has to do with the concept of secondary education in South Africa. While in francophone African countries secondary school starts after six years of education in primary school, in South Africa it starts after nine years. Therefore, the concepts of primary school and secondary school are not the same in francophone African countries and in South Africa. The South African concept of primary school involves more years. Consequently, in the francophone context, if you translate the South African term Primary School by *Ecole primaire* you may do a disservice to the holder of the certificate.

There is another table from the same source which is presented below.

Table N° 3: Educational System in South Africa

Education	School/ level	Grades	Age	Years	Notes
Primary	Primary school	1-9	7-15	9	Education is compulsory through grade 9
Secondary	Secondary education	10-12	14	13	National Senior Certificate (NSC) Exams taken upon completion of grade 12. The NSC grants access to higher education. Awarded since 2008.
Secondary	Vocational Secondary Education	11-12	16	2	
Post-secondary	National Certificate			1	
Post-secondary	Higher National Certificate			2	

That primary school lasts 9 years is confirmed in this table as well. Secondary education comprises 3 grades (9-12). Then, there is post-secondary which is unknown in francophone African countries.

The conclusion is that these terms and concepts do not have a universally accepted content. They are backed by the culture in which they are used. Having said that, it is important to recall House's theory : (1) *The need to understand how culture*

affects the construction of meanings in a certain context; (3) any linguistic item can only be properly understood with reference to the cultural context enveloping it; (4) the need to apply a 'cultural filter' in the process of translation.

Indeed, there is a need to apply a cultural filter in the process of translation because the translation of the South African concept of primary school into French needs the application of a 'cultural filter'.

As a translator, whenever you transfer terms and concepts from their original culture to another one, you have to study their content first to make sure that the names you attribute to them in the target culture are adequate and reflect their source culture content. This raises another important issue that can be termed '*intercultural transferability of terms and concepts*'. If the source language terms and concepts can be transferred easily to the target language without any change in their content, they are said to be '*interculturally transferable*'. On the contrary, if the transfer of terms and concepts from a source language culture to a target language culture implies a change in their content, then they are not '*interculturally transferable*.' This is ample evidence that translation does not operate solely at a linguistic level but it also operates at a cultural level. Great care needs to be taken while transferring a term or a concept from one culture to another. The knowledge of the concept in both cultures is necessary to avoid blunders.

At this stage, this paper backs the notion of cultural filter and recommends the adoption of a functionalist approach to translation.

5.4 The need to adopt a functionalist approach to translation

A logical conclusion of the descriptions made so far is that it is necessary to adopt a functionalist approach to translation. The term *functionalism* entails an orientation towards the target culture and the purpose of the translation. Within Translation Studies and in the translation industry, there is a need for more sensitisation about the issues associated with translating into English as Lingua Franca, as well as other *polycentric* languages, not only when academic diplomas are translated, but also when technical terms are found in some documents. Unless a functionalist approach is adopted, the translation may end up being rejected because the terms and concepts used in it may not be known in some target cultures.

The functionalist approach calls for a re-introduction of cultural studies in Translation Studies. So far it has been recalled that several authors, namely House, Reiß K. & H. Vermeer, Susan Bassnett, Eugene Nida, have insisted on the need to adopt a functionalist approach to translation. More importantly the validity of this urgent call has been ascertained and justified through the examples provided in this research work.

6. Conclusion

This paper has tackled the problems of equivalence inherent in the translation of academic diplomas from French into English. It has found that English is currently spoken in three groups of countries around the world. However, these countries have different cultures and standards. And the names given to diplomas in these countries, especially at secondary school level, are not the same. This represents a challenge because when you want to translate a particular diploma into English, you never know which culture to turn to in order to choose a name. If you choose a name that is used in Nigeria, for example, while the student is going to the USA with the translated diploma s/he may be in trouble in his/her host country. The best option is to ask the student where s/he is going with the translated diploma. When you know the student's destination, you are more likely to use a name that is known and accepted in the student's host country.

Another important finding of this paper is that translation is not only a linguistic activity but it is also a cultural transaction. Therefore, translators should be both bilingual and multicultural.

To ensure that a translation is acceptable in a target culture and language, a functionalist approach needs to be adopted. In subsequent papers, the applicability of the functional approach to the translation of other materials will be discussed in a bid to demonstrate the validity of this theory. It is a fact that some lexical items used in some English-speaking countries are not the same in the rest of the anglophone world because of a linguistic phenomenon called coinage.

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