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Gate-Keeping and Feedback as Determinants of the Translation/Interpretation Process

Endong, F. P. C.

Department of Theatre and Media Studies

University of Calabar

P. M. B. 1115, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

E-mail: floribertendong@yahoo.com

Tel: (+234) 7067297673

&

Inyang, J. B.

Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies

University of Calabar

P. M. B. 1115, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

Abstract

Based on a theoretical perspective and a critical documentary analysis, this paper seeks to locate the two phenomena of gate-keeping and feedback in the translation/interpretation process, a process understood by a good number of translation theorists to be a communicational act. The paper is inspired by Endong et al's double flow model of communication and translation and is grounded on the assumption that, there are observable evidences to establish the fact that feedback

and gate-keeping determine the translation process and its product in multiple subtle ways. This paper therefore concludes that the two phenomena of gate keeping and feedback should be taken into account in translation theorisation. Like in any other communicational act, gate-keeping and feedback ultimately change and fine tune elements intervening within the translational process, particularly the message. Major gate keepers in the translation process include the translator himself and the editors/publishing houses which through their respective editorial policies, often determine the final product of the translation process, shaping such a product, sometimes negatively. Similarly, the feedback influences the product of the translation act, as it potentially justifies or motivates the translator to effect a revision and/or fine tuning of initial versions of his translation.

Key words: Gate-Keeping, Feedback, Translation Theories, Communication Theories

Introduction

Translation has variously been defined as a communicational process or a complex process embedded in communication (Soukoup 2011; Champika et al 2011). This is in line with the perceived complementariness, affinity/compatibility existing between translation and communication (Endong et al 2013, Soukoup 2011; Nida 1991, Gutu 2012; Ajunwa 1996; Selevitch and Lederer 1983,). Komissarov (1991: 84) indicates a strong relationship between the two disciplines when he insightfully contends that the translational act has to be looked upon from a dualistic point of view since the message (the context, meaning) is first encoded (given form) in another language and then decoded (received, understood) and only then transcoded (given another form) into another language. Komissarov's (1991:84) conception of the translation process indicates a conjoining and complex communication-translation process involving encoding, decoding, and transcoding. With their double model flow of communication and translation, Endong et al (2013:161) on their part offer a richer and more complex (elongated) conception of the marriage between the two phenomena (between communication and translation). The complex model they propose is greatly inspired from the transportation model of communication. It situates translation in the second step of a complex process involving both intra-lingual and inter-lingual communication. The model equally places the translator at the conjoining stage of these two types of communication. Endong et al (2013) therefore conceive the double flow model of communication and translation to be

A merging of intra-lingual communication from the original source to the first receivers (of the source culture) to which the translator either belong or with which he is versed; and inter lingual communication from the translator

to the second set of receivers – the receivers from the target language culture.
(p. 161)

Communication itself is a complex construct involving (eventual) gate keeping and feedback. It has abundantly been argued that these two phenomena (feedback and gate keeping) greatly determine the communication process as they facilitate the changing or fine tuning of certain elements intervening in the communicational process (Dominick 2011: 9; O’Sullivan 1996: 10). This paper seeks to locate gate keeping and feed back in the translation process understood to be a communicational act. It is particularly grounded on the assumption that, if translation is a communicational process (as many theorists have presented it), there should be a possibility of locating and explaining the two phenomena (feedback and gate keeping) in this process. There should equally be evidences to establish the fact that they determine the translational act and its product in one way or the other and should therefore be taken into account in translation theorisation.

Gate-Keeping and Feedback in the Process of (Mass) Communication

Gate-keeping and feedback represent two important factors characterising the processes of communication (interpersonal and mass communication). The process of gate keeping is particularly typical of mass communication. It involves the selective attention (by the gatekeeper(s)) in the definition or composition of the message to be sent by the source to the receiver(s). A gatekeeper is therefore viewed as someone (or a group of persons) having control over what material eventually reaches the audience(s) or receiver(s). In mass communication organisations for instance (notably in news organisations) gatekeepers are people who make news decisions. They decide what items to include in the news-stories and what angle to emphasize (Bruce and Douglas 2008, p.507; Watson 2006, p.67; O’Sulian et al 1996, p. 97; Dominick 2011, p.10). They include sources, reporters, editors and news directors among others. In fact, gatekeepers exist in large numbers in all mass communication organisations. Gate-keeping in this respect intervenes at multiple stages of the communication chain and determines the product of this process (the communication process).

Gate-keeping is resolutely a subjective exercise as it is founded on the communicator’s thoughts, feelings and experience. There is no scientific or objective formula for deciding what elements to include in or exclude from the message to be send by source to the receiver(s). Message composition thus greatly depends on communicator’s or gatekeeper’s criteria for defining a particular material worthy to be communicated. No doubt, with respect to news dissemination, Bruce and Douglas (2008: 14-15) observe that

There is no scientific formula for deciding what news is and where it should be placed in a newspaper. At several junctures in the process of gathering and writing news, decisions to include or exclude information are made. Reporters and editors consciously or unconsciously, often rely on time-honoured news elements to help them make these decisions.

According to O'Sullivan et al (1996, p. 97), the professional role of gatekeepers is, in principle, to make objective, impartial decision vital to the final news product. Their decisions are most often influenced or prejudiced by three main factors namely (i) the gate keeper's subjective value system (what he likes and what he dislikes), (ii) his immediate work situation (iii) some of the identifiable legal bureaucratic and commercial controls that constraint the gatekeeper's decision" for instance laws on pornography, sedition and the like.

Feedback is similarly an important component in the process of communication. It can be defined as a process by which the decoder's reaction to the message is transmitted back to the encoder or the source. It is constituted by the responses of the receiver(s) that ultimately shape and possibly alter subsequent messages by the source. Dominick (2011:9) considers it to be a reversal of the communication flow, with the original source becoming the receiver and the original receiver becoming the new source. Feedback practically enables the source to measure the degree of effectiveness of his communicational act as it permits the latter (the source or encoder) to evaluate and know how the message has been received. Such an evaluation is important as it may determine whether there is need for a further fine tuning of the communicational act by effecting changes in transmission, encoding or medium. Dominick (2011:11) corroborates this fact when he concedes that it facilitates the reduction of semantic noise in the communication process.

As noise increases, message fidelity (how close the message that is sent resembles the message that is received) goes down [...] Clearly, feedback is important in reducing the effect of noise. The greater the potential for immediate feedback – that is, the more interplay between the source and receiver –the greater the chance that semantic noise will be overcome.

Communication specialists often differentiate between binary sets of feedbacks: (i) immediate feedback and delayed feedback and (ii) positive or negative feedback. As indicated by Dominick above, immediate feedback has more potentials of eliminating semantic noise (a situation where different people (receivers) have different meanings for different words or phrases). In the same light, O'Sullivan et al (1996, p.90) observe that the process models of communication generally relate feedback (especially immediate feedback) to efficiency. With particular reference to media, they posit that the mass media, notice boards or a tannoy system which allow

for limited or delayed feedback are seen as less efficient means of passing information than face-to-face communication, or the telephone.

Gate-Keeping in the Translation Process

The major and sole gatekeepers in the translation process include the translator himself and the editor (or the publishing house). These two components of the process are often guided by a number of subjective and selective values which greatly determine the final product of the translation act (Bethoz 2003; Durieux 2004). The decisional models of translation clearly illustrate this fact when they present the trans-coding exercise as a process involving “an unending skein of choices” (Lander 2001:130), as well as an act greatly depending on the choices made by the translator at all the stages of translation process, choices which are more or less strictly based on his personal subjective value system. Durieux (2004) buttresses this fact offering comments on these models thus:

The translating process may be defined as a sequence of decisions. Decision making is not the result of a purely rational reasoning relying on strict inference rules but the outcome of a mechanism governed by selective attention and controlled by emotion, hence situating the translating process between reason and emotion. (p. 349)

By the process of selective attention, the translator opens the gate to particular elements and closes the gate against others; this according to a system of value which is highly subjective and sometimes irrational. Indeed, the translator is compelled to choose a version among the multiple or several possible acceptable translations (Dasuki 2011; Motoc 2006; Durieux 1990; Lehman 1988; Reiss and Vermeer 1984; Catford 1980). Nouss (2010) describes this complex and irrational exercise/process referring to it as one of the phenomena which ultimately reinforce the myth of untranslatability (that is the impossibility to translate any text). He concedes that:

La folie, [...] n'est pas tant l'impossibilité pour le sujet [le traducteur] de traduire correctement son rapport au monde, dans les deux directions – ce qu'il reçoit du monde, ce qu'il exprime –, mais dans l'impossibilité de choisir une version parmi toutes les traductions possibles. (p. 133)

The fault, [...] does not principally lies on the impossibility for one [the translator] to correctly translate his relation to the world in the two directions – what he gathers from the world and what he is expressing –, but in the impossibility to select a version among all the possible translations of the text.

Similarly, the editors and publishing houses often play the role of gatekeepers through their in-house policies, sometimes influencing the product of the translation negatively. The translation choices or decisions (the work methodology) adopted by the translator may be reviewed by a publishing house just to satisfy in-house policies. Clouet and Sanchez (2003) observe this tendency when they concede that

Dans la pratique de l'activité traduisante, le manque de temps, les lacunes des traducteurs ou encore les impératifs des maisons d'édition font que le texte cible n'est pas toujours à la hauteur du texte source. (p. 24)

Factors intervening during the translation process like the lack of time, translator's mistakes or publishing houses' in-house policies contribute to rendering the target text not always as close to the source text as it is normally supposed to be. [Our Translation]

As noted by Clouet and Sanchez above, the editors and publishers' gate-keeping efforts are among the factors that often frustrate the effective translation of some texts. They shape the translation and indirectly influence the translator method of translation. The translator is, in this respect, often compelled or obliged to follow the in-house policy of the publishing house. This obviously influences the product of the translation process. In the same light, LOGOS GROUP (2013: 441) highlights the role editors and publishers play in determining the product of translation, stressing that such gate-keeping is done through the institution of evaluation (the evaluation of translation submitted by translator for possible publication). The gate-keeping efforts by the publisher or editors often negatively affect translation because these publishers and editors often do not have adequate notion of theories in translation to properly evaluate.

Les éditeurs adhèrent [souvent] à l'approche intuitive qui est l'ennemi de la théorie. Souvent la meilleure façon de faire accepter votre traduction dépend de plusieurs facteurs aléatoires, et sur le fait que les penchants instinctifs provenant du traducteur jumellent ceux de l'éditeur.

Publishers [often] adhere to the intuitive approach which is an enemy of theory. The acceptance of your translation often depends so much on a series of unforeseeable factors and on the fact that the intuitive decisions of the translator are in accordance with those of the publisher. [Our Translation]

The translator and the publishing house are the major gatekeepers in the transcoding phase, (the main stage of the general translation process). The translator

gate-keeps in a direct way through the application of selective attention in choosing versions among the various acceptable translations. Meanwhile the publishing house takes part in the gate keeping process and, indirectly, to the translation process by imposing a series of directives (in-house policies) to the translator. These in-house policies may affect the quality of the translation. We want to argue at this juncture that the gate-keeping process be seriously considered in theorizing or schematizing the translation process.

Feedback in the Process of Translation / Interpretation

The influence of feedback on the product of translation is very much visible in situations of interpretation as the exercise allows for immediate feedback (from the listeners) which may indicate whether the listeners understand the speaker and/or the translator and in turn indicate whether communication/translation is effective (Gutu 2012; Seleskovitch and Lederer 1984, Rastier 2006; Durieux 2004). The feedback in such situations is sometimes implicit as the listeners may not verbally express their reaction, their understanding or misunderstanding of the lectures but may indicate all these by facial expressions or any other means according to circumstances. Tijani (2008) makes allusion to such a type of feedback when he observes that:

L'auditoire vous épie et tout geste désordonné, tout rougissement d'yeux, tout bégaiement ou tout changement de voix [par l'interprète] entraînent un découragement de ceux qui vous écoutent. Même l'orateur vous épie aussi. (p. 68)

The listeners screen you and the least disordered body sign, any reddening of your eyes, any stammering or changing of the voice [by the interpreter] may cause the discouragement of those listening to you. Even the speaker also screens you. [Our translation]

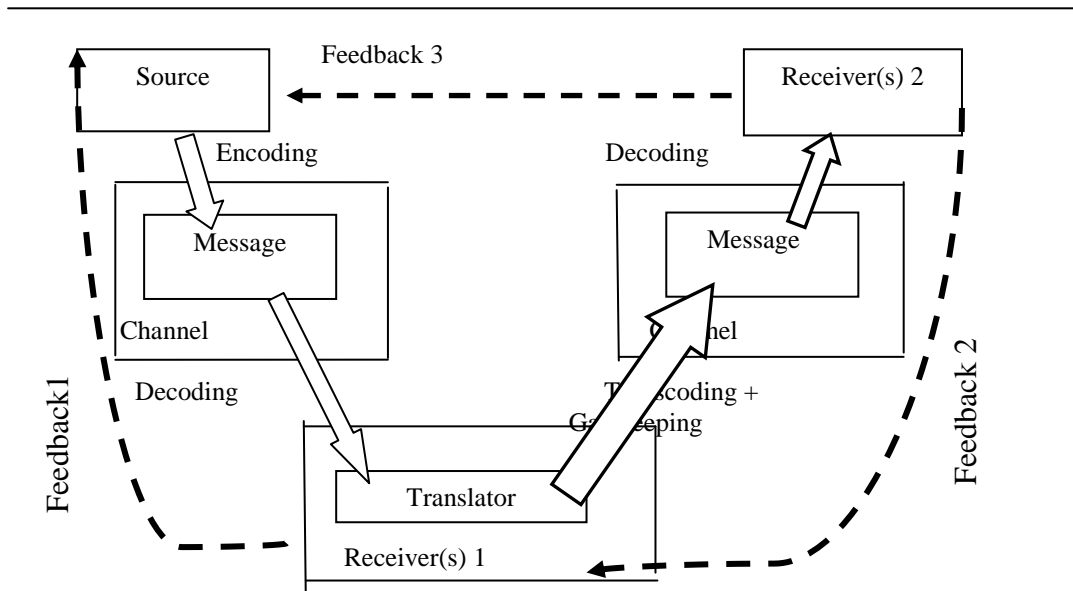
The reactions of the listeners often compel the translator to effect immediate adjustments where and when necessary to render the communication or translation effective. In pure translation situations, feedback is often delayed as most often, the translation has to be published and made accessible to potential consumers for reaction (delayed feedback) to be directed towards the translator. Such delayed feedback may sometimes take the forms of critiques, presented in scholarly papers or essay or private communications to the translator. How can this affect translation? It is true that it does not affect the translation already published, but may motivate the translator to revise his translation, especially when the said translation is replete with errors, wrong methodological choices made by the translator.

Locating Gate keeping and Feedback in Endong et al's two Flow Models of Communication and Translation

In their article titled “Communication and Translation: the Search for an Interface”, Endong et al (2013) have proposed a two-step flow model of communication and translation which situates translation in the second step of a complex process involving both an intra-lingual and an inter-lingual communication. The model proposed by these scholars likewise situates the translator at the conjoining part/stage of the model. It therefore presents the translator as the element that makes possible the prolongation of the communication process, from the end of the intra-lingual communication to the inter-lingual one.

According to this model, the translation process leads to the creation of a new message. The newness of the message is not in terms of meaning but rather in terms of language and presupposition (Larson 1998; Soukup 2012 Ekpeyong 2010; Fagbohun 2005; Gutu 2012; Admiral 1994; House 1998; Lambert 1998). Larson (1998) posits that translation is basically indicated by a change in the form of the message from the source language to the target language. Despite this surface (structural) change of the source language message, the meaning (ideally) remains inviolable (not tempered with) to ensure respect of the principle of fidelity.

The communication process could stop at the transcoding of the source text message if the translation had no motivation. Nevertheless, it is assumed that the goal of translation, especially literary, scientific and technical is communication. The translator is most often motivated/pushed by the aim to share the result of his work with the target language audience, thus to use a medium (a publication for instance) to communicate results of his work to the public.



Two-Flow Model of Communication and Translation (Revised)

This paper provides a revised version of this model, locating the gate-keeping process at the level of message trans-coding. The new version of the model proposed by this paper equally indicates the occurrence of feedback. It differentiates between three types (levels) of feedback (feedback 1, 2, and 3) and two principal categories of receivers: receivers 1 (from the source language culture) and receivers 2 (from the target language culture). Feedback 1 is the feedback produced by the source language culture and directed to the original source of the message. Meanwhile feedback 2 and 3 are all produced by the receivers in the target language culture but are respectively directed at the translator (secondary sender of the translated message) and the original sender of the non-translated message.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to locate the two phenomena of gate keeping and feedback in the translation process, a process understood by good number of theorists to be a communicational act. It provided a revised version of Endong et al's (2013) two flow model of communication and translation. The paper is particularly grounded on the assumption that, if translation is a communicational process, there should be a possibility of locating and explaining these two phenomena in the transcoding process. It has attempted to show how the two phenomena determine the translational

act and its product. The paper argues that, like in any other communicational act, gate keeping and feedback ultimately change and fine tune elements intervening within the translational process, particularly the message. Major gate keepers in the translational process include the translator himself and the editors/publishing houses which through their editorial policy often determine the final product of the translation process, shaping such a product, sometimes negatively (that is orchestrating translational errors). Similarly, the feedback (as a component of the communicational/translational process) similarly influences the product of the translational act, as it potentially justifies or provides motivations to the translator to effect a revision and/or fine tuning of initial version of his translation. The paper finally concludes that the two phenomena of gate keeping and feedback should be taken into account in translation theorisation.

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