

THE EFFECT OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE ON TRANSLATION OF LEXICAL-MEANING TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Lexical meaning of the source language can be transferred to target language effectively when the translators have background knowledge of society – culture – experience comprehension. This is the essential thing in order to transfer the render of a message from a source language to target language in high-quality translation in which the connotation, figurative meanings, and cultural-equivalent words are used. The objective of this study was to investigate how background knowledge of the translators affect their translation competence by using lexical-meaning equivalence. The study was conducted on two groups of 40 participants who had different background knowledge: group A consists of HUFU (Ho Chi Minh University of Food Industry) employees and group B is Sai Gon University students. Participants are required to translate the lexical-meaning texts which related to translators' prior knowledge. The data was collected by comparing the same translation texts done by groups A and B. The results indicated that there was a significant effect of translators' background knowledge on the quality of rendering. The perception of what they witnessed profoundly shapes the way they think and they tend to transfer their ideas across these perceptions. The implications of the results suggested that the perception of lexical meaning could be explained in details in every translation course.

Keywords: *Connotation; Cultural-Equivalent Words; Figurative Meanings; High-Quality Translation; Lexical-Meaning Equivalence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Background knowledge can be considered as previous knowledge that someone has experienced, perceived as their own way. An (2013) also defined the background knowledge as previous knowledge about a topic. Background knowledge can have an influence on someone's ability to comprehend the meaning of texts. When they undergo a certain situation or they know this before, they become aware of the meaning of topics, meaning of texts, and meaning of concepts easily. An (2013, p. 130) also illustrated that someone figures out the meaning of a text as "an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text". This seems to play an important role in translation. Translators can transfer the meaning of the rendering. Whether it is

effective, it relies on the way they use their connection between their background knowledge and their topics.

Translation is generally understood as a process that involves the rendering of a text from a source language into a target one. This transfer assures that the meaning of target language is similar to that of source language. Nina and Taber (1969) stated that translation process is first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style. Therefore, the equivalence of meaning between target language and the source language is necessary to have a high-quality translation. In order to have a high-quality translation of rendering, we have the equivalence between source language and target language by preserving semantic and stylistic (Bell,1991). This comprehensively indicates the main role of lexical meaning in

the high-quality translation. Translators also play a crucial role in high-quality translation because they themselves figure out the equivalence of the meaning between source language and target language. Therefore, Translators should have good background knowledge in order to be able to translate the rendering more efficiently. They have much experience about social life such as culture, technology, psychology, biology and etc...they definitely perceive the lexical meaning better than those who have no or little experience. When someone reaches cognition, they have to go through many steps: visualizing, predicting, summarizing, questioning, making the connection and inferring and they are not effective if they do not have sufficient background knowledge (Fisher, Ross & Grant, 2010). Toury (1995) also stated that translators are able to prioritize the social perspectives in their translation process.

Many researchers have conducted many works to provide the teachers, lecturers, scholars with a closer look. Vahid Rafieyan (2016) examined the culture-background knowledge of translation. He found that when translators are more familiar with the cultural features of target language, they can translate the rendering more efficiently than those who are not familiar with them. Nigel J. Holden and Harald F.O. Von Körtzfleisch (2004) showed that levels of accuracy are highlighted in the production of a good translation. The knowledge transfer of translators is also emphasized. When the translator lacks experiences of the issues that they have witnessed, they can not perceive their lexical meaning comprehensively. And that is easy to lead them to such indispensable problems as ambiguity, poor interference, and lack of equivalence.

Although many works have been done to date so far, more research needs to be carried out in order to verify the effect of background knowledge on a translation of lexical-meaning text. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the effect of background knowledge on translation of

lexical-meaning texts as translators perceive the lexical meaning of the text profoundly when they have a good background knowledge, or translators apprehend the lexical meaning of the text uncertainly when they have a poor background knowledge.

2. METHOD

Participants in the study consisted of two groups (group A and group B). Each group comprised 40 students chosen in a random manner. Group A included the employees of Ho Chi Minh University of Food Industry, and they are learning English as a second university qualification; group B was the sophomores of Sai Gon University. All participants were considered to have a similar level of English translation because they have participated in an intermediate-level test prior to the study in order to assure they can comprehend the lexical meanings and structures of intermediate-level rendering. In addition, both groups were not learned about translation theories in order to primarily use their own competence to translate rendering. The criterion for choosing the texts is that they must contain the connotation, figurative meanings, and cultural-equivalent words. In addition, the researcher chose the texts which have a limit of not more than 300 words. The purpose of such a choice aims at preventing the translators from being bored, which can affect the quality of renderings. Hence, The test instrument employed in this study was a passage from the autobiography of Bertrand Russel (1872-1914), a British philosopher. He summarized his personal philosophy on three main aspects: the love, the search for knowledge, and the sorrow of mankind. This passage permits the assessment of translators' background knowledge without demanding to comprehend complex structures. It requires the experience of the translators that they witnessed and the perception that they shape in their mind because these features of Berrand Russel indicated are familiar to individuals in society. Each person has their own way to encounter, and this leads to different ways of

perceiving lexical meaning. As a result, this thing affects not only their ways of choosing equivalent translation words between the source language and the target language but also the quality of renderings. There are a lot of different versions of translation with one original article since most words are more or less ambiguous (DeGroot and VanHell, 2005). Besides, the quality of the translation was assessed based on House's functional-pragmatic model (1977, 1997). The researcher has taken the first step "the source text was analyzed along dimensions of Field, Tenor, and Mode". The researcher compares the source text with translation text based on semantic and stylistic fidelity in order to find out the percentage of high-quality-translation renderings of participants.

3. PROCEDURE

The first step is to investigate the correlation of the background knowledge and translation of lexical-meaning text. Both groups (80 students) were requested to answer the questionnaires. These questionnaires were designed by the researcher and given information regarding to their prior knowledge: age, job, education, and marital status. In the assurance of participants' concentration as well as the quality of their renderings, each group was arranged in one room and each student sits in his or her own table. Next, the students from both groups were demanded to translate a passage from English language to Vietnamese one. When they worked on the text, participants were given unlimited time for translation and were allowed to use any kinds of dictionaries they wish in order to

assure that they think carefully and render a translation of high quality. When they finished the task, the researcher collected participants resulting renderings. Then, these translation texts were delivered to other people to read and to give comments in order to assure the validity of high quality translation. Finally, a total of 80 questionnaires and renderings were examined and compared which group has a high percentage of high-quality translation. The researcher compares the renderings of group A with those of group B and figures out the correlation between the age, the job, education level, and marital status of translators and the way they perceive the lexical meanings of the passage in terms of the connotation, figurative meanings, and cultural-equivalent words. Moreover, the researcher also finds out this kind of correlation among participants in group A and group B.

4. RESULTS

The descriptions of the age, the job, education level, and marital status of translators in group A and group B and the way they perceive the lexical-meaning of the passage in terms of the connotation, figurative meanings, and cultural-equivalent words are displayed in Figure 1.

The descriptions of the age, the job, education level, and marital status among participants in each group and the way they perceive the lexical-meaning of the passage in terms of the connotation, figurative meanings, and cultural-equivalent words are displayed in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

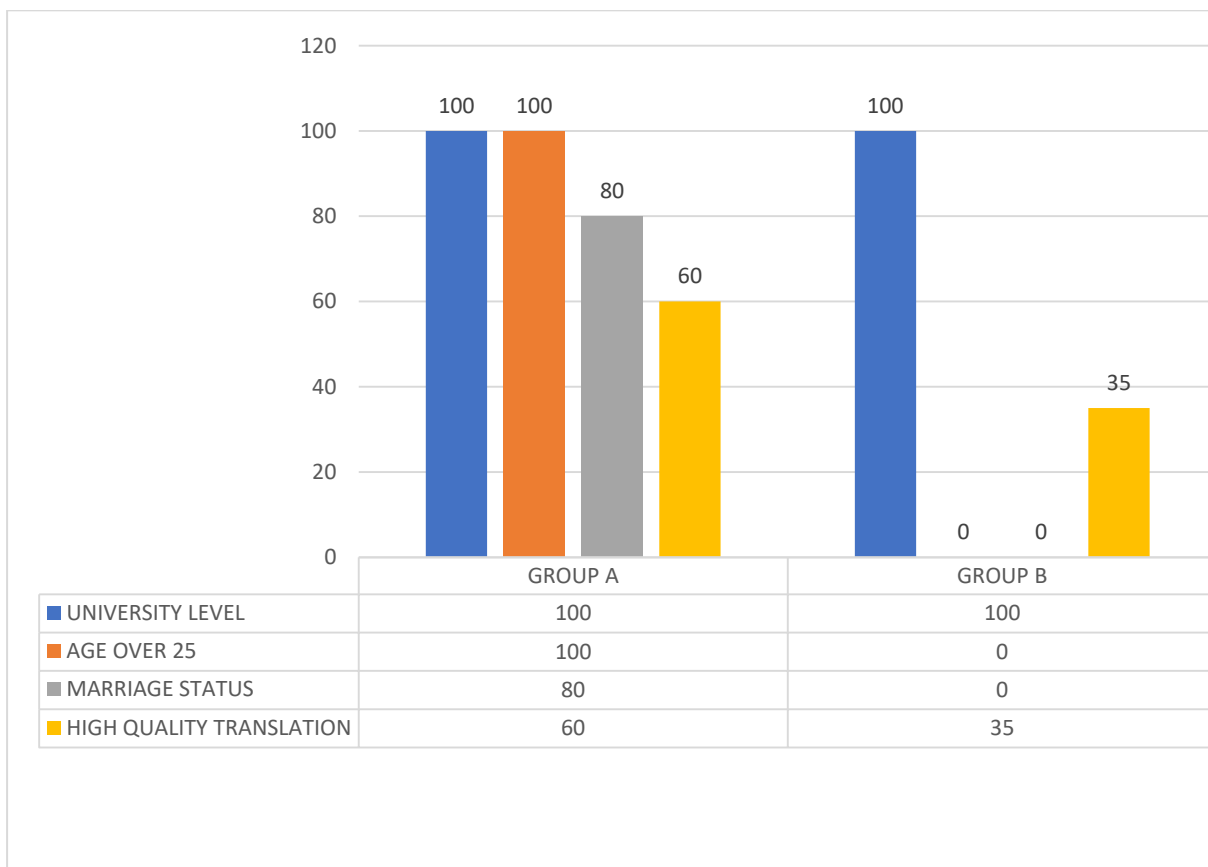


Figure 1. The Descriptions between Group A and B

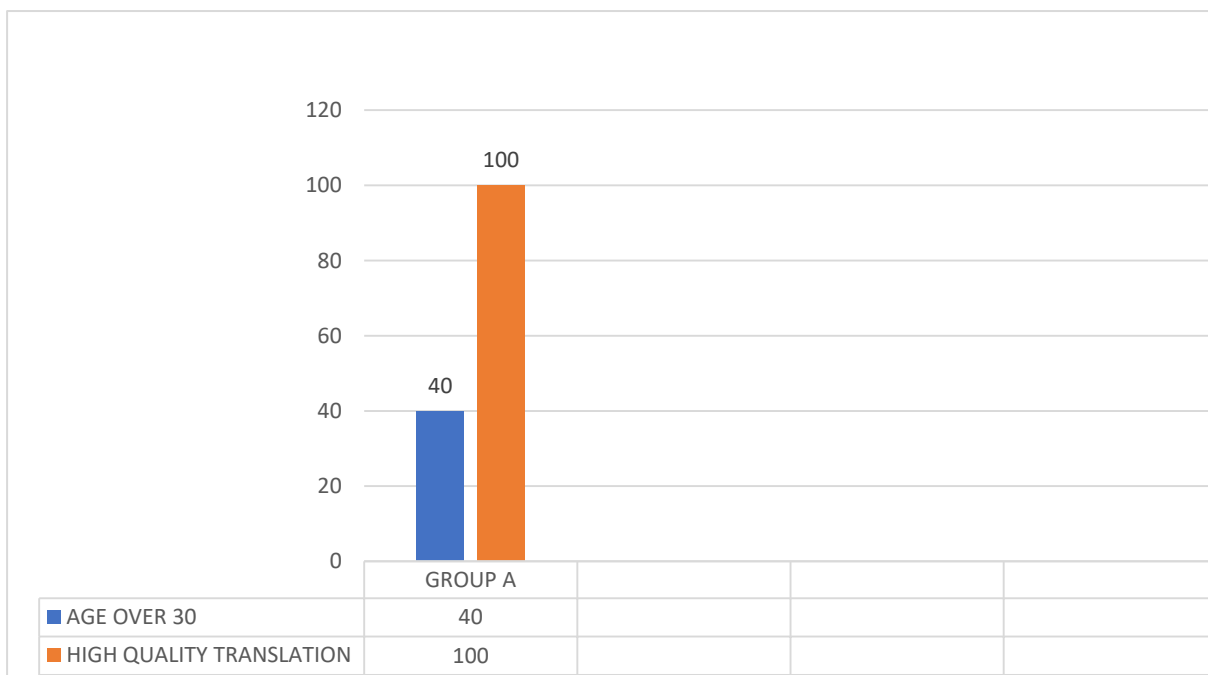


Figure 2. The Descriptions of Background Knowledge of Every Member in Group A



Figure 3. The Descriptions of Background Knowledge of Every Member in Group B

The results of the study indicate that background knowledge had a great effect on the quality of translation.

Figure 1 shows that 100% participants of group A are at the age over 25 and 80% of them are married. The percentage of the age and marriage status of group B are 0% (nobody is over 25 years of age and married). The results of high-quality renderings are 60% for group A compared to 35% for group B. Through these figures, we see that there is a marked difference in the quality of translation between group A and group B. Participants who are of a stable job for a living, at the age of enough maturity, and married translate the render better in terms of connotation and figurative meaning.

Figure 2 displays the percentage of participants' background knowledge also has a dramatic difference in the quality of translation among the members in group A. The better quality of translation in terms of connotation and figurative meaning is, the older the participants are getting.

Figure 3 shows that there are 30% of the participants at the age of over 21, all of them

having a part-time job and at least one-time having lovers. They translate the rendering better in terms of connotation and figurative meaning (100% high-quality rendering).

Besides, results of the study also indicate that participants who do not have good background knowledge share the same way of translation, that is, to translate the meaning of the words that are looked up in a dictionary. They do not perceive the profound meaning of the vocabulary used by the author. They cannot translate the sentences, the phrases, and the words in terms of figurative meaning and connotation.

5. DISCUSSION

The researcher assumed that the translators' background knowledge has a great influence on translators' competence and this is represented by the quality of translation of rendering. The findings proved that this assumption of a researcher is right. The participants have a good background knowledge; they have a high-quality rendering. One possible conclusion is that the age of the participants also has a significant impact on their competence of translation.

They get older than others, it means that they have experienced many things in life both physically and mentally. They gradually build up themselves real-life experience and shape the way they think about the world. Therefore, the participants translate the sentences, the phrases or even the words according to their thinking. They put themselves in the context that they have experienced in a real life to translate their rendering. Besides, they translate the lexical-meaning words profoundly. For example, when they translate the paragraph two, they use the equivalence between the source language and the target language effectively. They indicate the meaning of the passage exactly the same as the feeling or emotion that the author wants to convey in this passage. These are a few sentences translated by a member of group A:

Niềm đam mê đầu tiên của tôi là được chìm đắm trong tình yêu bởi vì tình yêu sẽ mang đến cho tôi một cảm xúc mãnh liệt. Với cảm xúc mê mẩn này tôi có thể đánh đổi tất cả chỉ để được một lần được sống trong khoảnh khắc này. And here are the translated sentences from a few members of group B: Đầu tiên, Tôi muốn có tình yêu vì nó mang lại sự xuất thân tuyệt vời đến nỗi tôi phải hy sinh tất cả phần còn lại của cuộc đời mình trong vài giờ vì niềm vui này.

In addition, they (group A) translate the phrases or the words in this passage in terms of connotation and figurative meaning effectively such as “shivering consciousness” means that uncontrollable as the result of frightening perception “mơ hồ”. If someone falls into this situation, they will easily picture it in their thought. Most of the members of group A figure out this phrase as “uncontrollable as the result of frightening

perception”. However, the members of group B almost translate this phrase “shivering consciousness” as “ý thức run rẩy”. They find difficult to figure out the equivalence between two languages.

Moreover, each of the participants in group A or B has a different experience, they also have a different translation. Members of group B has a part-time job and have at least a sentimental love, they transfer the word “ecstasy” fairly effectively. “Ecstasy” means “an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement” and they translate it into “cảm xúc thăng hoa”. They can comprehend profoundly the meaning of this word by their own emotion. This study has taken a step in the direction of defining the correlation between background knowledge and translators’ competence. It is possible of course that there is a limitation in this study. A high degree of variance was found in the data, it would be beneficial to carry out other studies on different population. Most of members of group A work in technology faculty of the university, although they still convey the right spirit of sentences and words in the rendering, not very literary. In addition, the passage that I have chosen is not a standard text for translation, and as everyone recognizes that it is suitable for second-year students without knowledge of translation theory.

Finally, from the researcher’s findings, it is suggested that the perception of lexical meaning could be explained in detail in every translation course so that the students can absorb the meaning in terms of connotation and figurative meaning. Moreover, the teacher should recommend the students use the method of semantic translation after they have learnt about translation theory.

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