

Lost in translation? Culture, language and the role of the translator in international business

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Abstract

Purpose Issues of language in international business have been the focus of a growing body of theoretical and empirical work, and this paper contributes to this literature, focusing specifically on issues of translation. The role of translator will vary depending on the language strategy adopted, with strategies linked to differing perspectives on language in international business – mechanical, cultural and political. We examine these perspectives through the lens of a specific problem for transnational communication – ‘untranslatable’ words and concepts.

Design/methodology/approach Interviews were conducted with professional linguists (translators and interpreters) to explore how they dealt with issues of untranslatable but cultural salient words in their day-to-day work with international businesses, using the problems of translating the Farsi word *tarouf* into English as a case in point.

Findings The linguists agreed that *tarouf* was an untranslatable word, and described their strategies to deal with this problem. The commonest

strategy was avoidance, stemming from linguists' concern to maintain their professional standing with clients, a finding which reflects an emerging emphasis on the importance of context and relationships for understanding inter-cultural communication.

Practical implications The study highlights the crucial role of the translator in international business, and draws attention to the potential for cross-cultural communication problems arising from mutual lack of awareness of culturally-salient but inherently untranslatable words or phrases.

Social implications Effective inter-cultural communication is an issue of great importance to wider society, and business has historically been the commonest site of such communication. Our study highlights an issue of considerable importance for improving inter-cultural communications, contributing to a growing inter-disciplinary literature in this area.

Originality/value Much of the research on language in international business has focused on the emergence of English as a lingua franca, but the present study focuses on specific issues of translation and does so in an under-researched location, Iran. It draws attention to a problem of translation not widely discussed, and shows how important this issue can be for international business.

Paper type Research paper

Keywords: international business; interpreters; language; tarouf; translators; cross-cultural communication

Introduction

The multinational corporation (MNC) is, by definition, a multilingual organisation (Fredriksson et al, 2006) and multilingual situations occur with increasing regularity at various levels of the organisation (Charles and Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). Though issues of communication within MNCs have been a concern within the field of international business for an extended period, the specific issue of language was neglected until relatively recently (Janssens et al, 2004; Welch et al, 2005). A possible explanation is that international business practice has also been somewhat blind to this issue – though the practicalities of language barriers were widely recognised, the full implications of ‘talking a different language’ were not. Welch and Welch suggest language is ‘a mental model, framing activity and behaviour’ (2008: 341), and these framing effects can be visible even at the level of a single word. An example is offered by Wierzbicka’s (2001) examination of the Polish word *przykro*. Usually translated as hurt, offended, sorry or sad, Wierzbicka suggests something is lost in translation, describing *przykro* as a ‘culturally salient’

Polish emotion. 'That is not to say that speakers of English never experience the emotion associated in Polish with the word *przykro*; only that they do not think habitually about their experiences in these terms' (Wierzbicka, 2001: 22). The Chinese word *guanxi* offers another obvious example of a word which is both culturally salient and yet inherently 'untranslatable'. *Gaunxi* has become widely known – discussed and researched to a point where there is a degree of awareness of the concept and its importance in international business. Logically there must be many *guanxis* and *przykros*, that is, many words of considerable significance for understanding a given culture which nevertheless cannot be readily translated into other languages. Our inability to translate them therefore becomes problematic for successful cross-cultural communication, and hence international business.

Clearly care needs to be taken with the claim that some words are 'untranslatable'. What we have in mind are two types of problem. The first occurs when the word has no direct equivalent in the target language, and must therefore be 'explained' rather than translated. The German word *schadenfreude* offers a good example – the emotion it describes is highly recognisable but there is no equivalent word in English, and it would therefore have to be translated by giving its definition. In practice, the

utility of having a word for this emotion so appeals to English speakers than *schadenfreude* has become a widely-used lend word. The second problem occurs where the word itself appears to be readily translated (e.g. *guanxi* is acceptably rendered into English as ‘relationship’) but its connotations and cultural salience are lost in the translation, as noted for *przyckro* (Wierzbicka, 2001), above. The ‘untranslatable’ word chosen as an exemplar for the present article, the Farsi word *tarouf*, poses both types of problem – it has no direct translation into English, and those words which might be used as passable equivalents fail to carry the highly important cultural connotations of the word.

Linguistic imperialism

Much of the literature on the role of language in international business has focused on two particular features. The first is the decisions made by MNCs regarding language use, particularly around choices as to whether to adopt a corporate lingua franca (and if so, which language to adopt) and related issues of translation and interpretation. The second is the study of the growth of English as a lingua franca, through linguistic imperialism (Philipson, 1992). Though a complex notion, linguistic imperialism is usefully captured as the process by which speakers of one

language come to feel it necessary to use another language, 'to the point where they believe they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life' (Ansre, 1979, cited in Sliwa, 2008). Ansre is clearly describing a final outcome, and the process of linguistic imperialism is likely to be highly contested. Though the present article is focused on issues of translation in international business, the rise of English as a lingua franca through linguistic imperialism forms an important backdrop our study, and we will briefly explore this literature.

In her analysis of the complex patterns of linguistic imperialism in Poland over two centuries, Sliwa (2008) provides interesting examples of how such processes can arise and be enacted. She notes that during the period of partition (1815-1918), when Poland ceased to be an independent nation and was divided up between Prussia (later Germany) and Russia, both of the colonising nations attempted (in somewhat different ways) to assert the dominance of their language over Polish. These efforts met with stubborn and highly organised resistance, and Sliwa suggests this resistance to linguistic imperialism was a key element in the creation of Polish civic society. Since regaining independence in 1918 Poland has remained a sovereign state but during the Soviet era there was

considerable pressure to accept Russian as a second language, a pressure deeply resented by the Polish people. Against this backdrop of successful Polish resistance to linguistic imperialism stretching back over almost two centuries, it is perhaps surprising that in the post-Soviet era very large numbers of Polish people have enthusiastically embraced the linguistic imperialism associated with the rise and rise of English as a global language.

The Iranian experience has some parallels with the Polish experience in the post-Soviet era – see Tollefson (1991) for a detailed outline. Before the fall of the Shah in 1979, English had been actively promoted in Iran as a second language and became the major technical language of business, the military, higher education, and the media, forming the basis for engaging with modernisation and globalisation. Following the Islamic Revolution, English became associated with the regime of the Shah, and with the two countries towards which the new regime was most hostile, Britain and especially the USA which was seen as the primary external opponent of the revolution. The status of English was greatly reduced by the abandoning of the modernisation programme in which English had played a key role, and which had become identified with increasing domination of Iran by a Westernised elite. Ayatollah Khomeini associated

English with Western subjugation of the Iranian people, and urged his followers not to buy or read books in which foreigners were quoted, and criticised the use of English in the names of stores, streets, clothing, and other common objects (Khomeini, 1980). Despite all this, and a general policy of isolation, Iranian business has not been able to avoid the growing influence of English as the lingua franca for international business.

Language barriers in international business

These issues of translation can obviously be viewed as a language barrier for international business, but Harzing and Feely (2008) argue that the idea of 'language barriers' has been rather under-defined. They propose a model of communication in which different components contribute to a vicious circle which creates the language barrier – failure to communicate effectively leads to uncertainty, anxiety and mistrust, which produces misattribution, conflict and cognitive distortion, to which the various parties respond by engaging in greater formality in communication, which is less effective...and the circle is completed. Their model focuses on the HQ-subsidary relationship in MNCs, but the idea that communication problems arising from language differences might produce a vicious circle seems relevant to a range of settings within international business.

Jameson argues that language 'defines cultural groups, as well as being the most frequently used symbolic systems through which culture is conveyed' (2007: 214), and as such it is core to cross-cultural communication in all settings. One of the key issues which led us to examine the issue of 'untranslatable' words is that they are likely to lead to situations in which the failure to communicate effectively is either not recognised, or is recognised but baffling to the parties involved.

Welch and Welch (2008) identify seven factors which affect knowledge transfer in MNCs, and suggest language is a moderating or intervening variable for all of them, consistent with Barner-Rasmussen and Bjorkman's (2005) finding that language fluency was a key factor in inter-unit communication intensity. One factor of particular importance is staff transfers. Long seen as a particularly effective method of knowledge transfer in both directions (Dowling and Welch, 2004; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005), Welch and Welch (2008) suggest increased use of short-term assignments rather than long term expatriation has made language an even more significant factor – it makes less sense for MNCs to invest in language training for short-term assignees, so they are more likely to have to work through interpreters (Welch, Welch and Piekkari, 2005) who

may 'modify the messages for local audience sensitivities' (Welch and Welch, 2008: 352).

Charles (2007) identifies a number of themes emerging from research on language in international business, one of which is particularly pertinent to the present study. She suggests that informal/oral communication should be considered 'of paramount importance in MNCs', noting that understanding of technical matters can often be less problematic than 'ordinary small talk'. Engaging in small talk requires a real ease with a language, and Charles has in mind situations in which staff have enough knowledge of a language to conduct formal meetings, but not enough to participate in 'chat' outside of these meetings. In this study we examined situations in which translation and interpretation were always necessary, so one might imagine this difficulty would not arise, but in fact our participants reported a similar issue. It was not the translation of formal business matters which caused difficulty, but the translation of the everyday 'niceties' which carry little formal business information but matter greatly for developing relationships between business partners (especially across cultural and linguistic boundaries). This is especially important in some countries and cultures – in this case, Iran, where trust at the

beginning of a business relationship is viewed as more important than signing the contract (Latifi 1997, Budwar and Yaw 2001).

Translation Studies

In this section we want to examine some of the key ideas in the field of translation studies which might shed light on the present study, though it is useful to recall Nida's point that many translators will not draw upon theory in any conscious fashion:

Instead of speaking of theories of translation, we should perhaps speak more about various approaches to the task of translating, different orientations which provide helpful insight, and diverse ways of talking about how a message can be transferred from one language to another. (Nida, 1991: 21).

We can see that the translator has a key role to play in this process, but Pym (2006) notes that until recently the field of translation studies has paid relatively little attention to their role as mediators. It should be noted that although we have used translator as a generic term, it is more precise to use this to refer to those who translate the written word. Translators of the spoken word are more commonly referred to as interpreters, and Pym (2006) suggests that the importance of the mediating role is more obvious

and immediate for interpreters. Consistent with this, our findings suggest that the issue of untranslatable words presents more of a problem for interpreters than translators.

Our discussion of linguistic imperialism highlighted issues of power in language, and work within translation studies highlight a very specific example of how power dynamics affect translation. There appears to be a 'gradient' of prestige, such that when material is translated from a highly prestigious language/culture, it retains more of its original form, consistent with the 'law of interference' (Toury, 1995), which emphasizes that the nature of the source text affects the target text. Thus a Shakespearean sonnet is likely to be rendered into the target language as a fourteen-line poem, even if that language/culture had no tradition of using such a poetic form. It would be a matter of empirical investigation to determine which languages/cultures are viewed as 'highly prestigious', but in the context of international business it seems legitimate to assume that English is more prestigious than Farsi. Logically, this would mean that English gets translated in Farsi in a form closer to the original than occurs when Farsi is translated into English. The complex and culturally-specific phrases associated with *tarouf* would therefore be rendered into their nearest English equivalent, almost certainly losing something in the process. Note

however that this may be simply an effect of the 'law of growing standardization' (Toury, 1995) – the tendency for translated texts to be more similar to each other than other texts – since Pym (2008) notes that when he puts 'Australianisms' into his academic texts they either disappear or “are turned into something absolutely standard” in translations. Taken together Toury's two laws of translation would be expected to lead to a situation in which translation from Farsi into English produces 'texts' (including the spoken word) which lack many of the important cultural nuances of the original, having considerable similarity to other translated texts and few distinctly Iranian features.

Approaches to language in international business

Translation studies has also informed the development of theory on language in international business. Janssens et al (2004) draw upon the field to propose three perspectives on translation and language use in MNCs, and show how each leads to a different language strategy. The role of translators is significant in all strategies, but the nature of that role varies.

Mechanical perspective

Consistent with the source model of translation, which views translation as a technical exercise by which a source text is 'correctly' rendered from one language to another, this approach assumes 'a clear and unambiguous relationship between language and empirical reality and translation equals the transfer of objective information' (Tietze, 2008: 215), and thus takes for granted that it is possible to achieve a directly equivalent translation between languages. A language strategy coming from a mechanical perspective is likely to encourage adoption of a lingua franca. As translation is viewed as a straightforward matter, MNCs adopting this approach may use their own staff rather than professional translators.

Cultural perspective

The target model in translation studies emphasises the importance of the target audience and of the need to recognise the cultural dimension of language. In this model the translator's detailed knowledge of language is not sufficient; s/he will also need some understanding of culture. This encourages a cultural perspective on language use, and leads to strategy which is more respecting of the diversity of native languages spoken within the MNC and views translators as 'mediators between different cultural meaning systems' (Janssens et al, 2004: 422). The requirement for knowledge of both language and culture leads to a preference for

native speakers as they are conversant with, and able to adjust texts for, the target culture. This would appear to place constraints on the translator's range of practice – for example, an American fluent in English and Spanish who has worked in Mexico would seem to be an obvious choice to act as an interpreter for business meetings between Mexican and American executives, but is s/he equally competent to provide interpretation for a meeting of Spanish and Australian executives? The fact that such questions rarely arise, even in situations where appropriate translation would seem of supreme importance, underlines that the mechanical perspective remains the dominant paradigm in terms of language strategy in international management (Welch, Welch and Piekkari, 2005).

Political perspective

Building upon the cultural perspective, the political perspective acknowledges the importance of recognising different linguistic-cultural meaning systems but emphasises the issues of power associated with decisions on language use. The selection of a lingua franca is perhaps the most obvious example of such a decision – a merger of two MNCs from different countries may seem less a merger and more a takeover if the language of one country is chosen as the merged company's lingua

franca – see Charles (2007) for an extended discussion of such issues.

Other decisions might include what gets translated, and who gets to decide this. The political perspective leads to language strategy which recognises the potential power dynamics of decisions on language use, and the role of translators in this perspective is as ‘negotiators between competing value systems’ (Janssens et al, 2004: 426).

The different perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and in this article we examine an issue which can be seen to relate to all of them – the issue of ‘untranslatable’ words. This might seem a problem only for language strategy based on a mechanical perspective, but we suggest the inability to render a clear mechanical translation leads to issues around how to translate the word so as to convey the meaning to the target culture. In addition, the process of deciding whether the inability to translate the word is a matter of any importance is clearly an issue which can be viewed from the political perspective. In order to explore this issue we have chosen as an exemplar the Farsi word, *tarouf*, an important cultural concept in Iran for which there is no directly equivalent word (or concept) in English.

An overview of Tarouf

Tarouf ('tar-off') is a Farsi word which describes a complex cultural construct. Three different English-Farsi dictionaries offer the following translations:

- salutation, compliment, comity, chivalry
- compliment, ceremony, offer, present
- compliment(s), ceremony, offer, gift, flummery, courtesy, flattery, formality, good manners, soft tongue, honeyed phrases.

Many of these words have only limited relation to each other, and this is because they can be seen as facets of *tarouf*, and the kinds of behaviours associated with it. Two examples illustrate *tarouf* more effectively than these definitions. The first is an Iranian joke:

Many years ago, a young Persian woman became pregnant. The months passed and she kept getting bigger, finally nine months came but no baby came out. She kept getting bigger and bigger...but still no baby! Years went by until she became an old woman with a huge belly. Finally the doctors had a machine that could look into her belly and see what was going on in there. They looked inside and saw two men with beards saying to each other, 'after you', 'no, after you', 'no please, after you'.

A second example was told to us by an Iranian about his cousin, born in the UK of Iranian parents, who made his first visit to Iran in his early 20s.

He took a taxi back to the airport, and he and the driver chatted for the whole of the journey. When he got to the airport he asked the driver to tell him the fare, but the driver said there was no charge, it had been a pleasure to talk with him. My cousin didn't know about tarouf, so he took this at face value, thanked him profusely and left!

The driver, despite no doubt being aghast at this turn of events, let him go. This illustrates that *tarouf* is deeply culturally embedded – the driver could ill afford to offer a free fare for such a long journey, yet faced with a customer who did not recognise the conventions of *tarouf* he felt unable to step outside of them and demand the fare.

Welch, Welch and Piekkari (2005) identify three forms or layers of language used in the workplace – everyday language, ‘company speak’ and technical/professional/ industry language. *Tarouf* will most typically be found at the level of everyday language, but its influence is likely to be found at all layers, for example, even in technical presentations there will be courtesies and conventions to be observed. One of the Iranian managers noted ‘Iranian culture looks at language as an art and for this reason they use *tarouf* so much in daily activities’. Certainly it is ‘hard to disentangle language effects from broader cultural influences’ (Welch, Welch and Piekkari, 2005: 14) – as well as being an untranslatable word,

tarouf is a deeply embedded part of Iranian culture which people deal with on a daily basis, so it is important to examine it in terms of the concept just as much as the word. With that in mind, we developed the following empirical questions:

Q1: How do translators deal with the problem of translating the word *tarouf*?

Q2: In addition to the problems with the *word*, does the *concept of tarouf* have an impact on their role in facilitating communication between Farsi and non-Farsi speakers in international business?

Q3: What are the implications of these issues for international business communication?

Method

In order to explore the idea of *tarouf* as an 'untranslatable' word, we interviewed translators working in English and Farsi. We were unable to secure access to translators through agencies, who appeared concerned our approach was a ruse to gain access to translators without paying an agency fee. We therefore adopted a snowball sampling approach, going directly to individual translators based in Iran, and asking them to

recommend other potential participants for us to contact. Clearly the study was premised on our claim that *tarouf* is untranslatable, so we initially asked all participants whether they agreed with that assertion. All confirmed that it was so, and we proceeded to explore the three empirical questions listed above via in-depth telephone interviews with 31 individuals – 16 translators (5 men, 11 women) and 14 interpreters (12 men, 2 women). Six of the interpreters were interviewed twice, and were also sent follow-up e-mails seeking clarification of key points. It was not possible to record the interviews so we were unable to produce transcripts, however detailed notes were taken. The opportunity for follow-up interviews and e-mails provided a further rigour to the data gathering process. The question of the implications for international business communication was something upon which they could provide some insight, but we decided to compare their views to those of practising managers so after completing the interviews with the translators, we undertook telephone interviews with five managers (three Iranian, two British) working for MNCs in Iran. The data analysis approach adopted was somewhat simplistic, in that we treated the participants' response as reporting fact, rather than as texts for analysis. This may seem an odd approach, given that the very subject matter of language and translation draws our attention to issues of discourse, language games etc. As our

study was focused on examining how professional linguists handle the issue of untranslatable words in their practice, and we therefore decided to treat the interviews as broadly factual reports.

Findings

How do you deal with the word tarouf in your work?

Though the concept of *tarouf* permeates all Iranian writing and speech, the word itself will occur relatively infrequently in the kinds of business documents which translators handle. They were initially rather defensive when we asked them about the difficulties in translating *tarouf*. Once they understood we were not criticising their practice, but interested in how they dealt with the problem, they explained that where possible they would seek a word which captured as far as possible the particular element of *tarouf* which was relevant in that passage. (Note: if the translated passages were then subjected to back translation, often seen as the acid test of good translation, the second translator would almost certainly not translate any of these words as '*tarouf*'). The challenge of translation posed by *tarouf* was not confined to the word itself. There are what might be called '*tarouf* phrases', expressions of politeness which serve a 'phatic function' (Tietze, 2007), that is, a function in maintaining social

relationships. A good example is a phrase which translates as 'I hope your hand doesn't hurt'. The phrase is loosely comparable to expressions in English such as 'I hope I didn't put you to any trouble' or 'Thank you, but you really shouldn't have', used to express gratitude for another's exertions for your benefit. Literal translation of these expressions of *tarouf* can produce English phrases which are difficult to understand. If the anticipated reader has no knowledge about Iranian culture, translators may use footnotes to explain the role or meaning of the phrase.

Another aspect of *tarouf* is the use of repetition – certain Farsi passages would contain multiple phrases which say broadly the same thing in different ways, and might seem like unnecessary repetition, and the translator might choose to edit out some of the repetition. It is important to note that our respondents are all working between English and Farsi, and typically with British and American clients. Translating into a language other than English, or for a culture which uses repetition to serve a phatic function, the translators might choose to translate the passages in full.

The interpreters noted the word rarely arises in business meetings, so it is not in itself a challenge for interpretation. However, what does arise very frequently are the '*tarouf* phrases' we described above. The example

cited, 'I hope your hand doesn't hurt', is frequently used even in situations where the effort is minimal. For example, in a meeting where a document is handed round by each person taking a copy and passing the rest on, one would be expected to use this phrase to express *tarouf*.

How do you deal with the concept of tarouf in your work?

The interpreters frequently encountered language and behaviour which was, to an Iranian, recognisably an example of *tarouf*. They admitted that in many cases they simply ignored it, but this depended on the situation. In cases where it was impossible to ignore they would try to translate in a way which was as close as possible to the intended meaning whilst presenting it in ways which their clients would find recognisable because of their own culture. This approach of 'translation by analogy' is potentially problematic, since it can give the listener a false impression that they understand a particular cultural concept. As an example, an American tourist in the UK asked the first author about cricket, adding 'it's kinda like baseball, right?' Just as our interpreters have to make a judgement about how much interpretation is actually necessary, so the author had to think about how much the listener needed (or wanted) to understand the differences in rules, history, the way in which the game could once be seen as a microcosm of the British class system, etc. Describing the

choices available when a speaker uses a '*tarouf* phrase', one interpreter suggested he might substitute it with an English expression which serves a similar function, if he did not have enough time for a long explanation (e.g. in oral translations of short meetings). Alternatively, he might translate the expression word for word into English and provide the addressee with an explanation of the phrase and its function in daily conversation at a later point (e.g. in a break between meetings). The interpreters made clear that if they think translating the word or phrase may cause confusion they do not translate it.

We noted above that translators might edit Farsi passages, and the interpreters performed a similar editing when translating from Farsi to English, but significantly they reversed this when translating from English to Farsi. For example, at a first meeting between two business people, the Iranian speaker would engage in an extended introduction involving many compliments and courtesies. The interpreter might render this as 'He is delighted to welcome you here, and is really looking forward to working with you'. By contrast, if the English speaker then replied with a polite but fairly brief response to this courtesy, the interpreter would tend to add in some additional *tarouf* phrases so as to convey the appropriate level of courtesy and respect. This process sometimes created difficulties

for them, when the speaker questions the relative brevity (or loquacity) of the interpreter's 'translation' of what they have just said. In such cases, and in order to appear professional, the interpreter may have to move beyond translation or interpretation, and engage in explanation. In this way, they take on a role as a cultural guide.

The need to 'explain' *tarouf* arises in part because of the difficulty of translating it. We were interested to discover that interpreters are very conscious of making choices about whether to engage in this activity. For example, in a situation which they anticipate as being a one-off meeting with a client, they generally ignore the issue, unless something occurs which they feel forces them to offer an explanation. The issue of striking differences in the length of the original speech and the translation is one example, another is when clients comment upon behaviours they observe which form part of *tarouf*, but which are bewildering to the non-Iranian.

Participants offered several examples of situations of *tarouf* which arise in international business. One example is seating in meetings – the top of the meeting table is the most senior manager's place and around that is the place for other staff – staff automatically, as a matter of respect, do not choose the top of table. When there is an international meeting, foreign

participants find it difficult to understand why locals make sure not to sit in a specific area and the efforts to ensure correct placement can lead to people moving around the table, like a game of musical chairs, in an effort to ensure that status is reflected in people's relative distances from the top of the table. Another example is that when someone senior enters the room people will typically stand up as a sign of respect. Who goes through the door first is also an issue. The final example concerns the issue of turning one's back to someone (viewed in many cultures as a sign of rudeness) – where room layouts make it almost impossible to avoid, individuals will still attempt to observe *tarouf*, leading to situations in which individuals at the meeting will be moving almost constantly in their seats trying to ensure that they present their back to no-one.

What are the implications of tarouf for international business communication?

The interpreters noted that if they were unable to explain *tarouf* clearly, it can cause confusion and uncertainty for their clients who have no idea of this part of Iranian culture. One example was a meeting in Tehran when the Iranian speaker finished his presentation by saying to his English counterpart 'this is all the result of your hard work'. When the interpreter translated this, the non-Iranians at the presentation seemed rather taken

aback by this, and asked how this person could have helped the other so much when they did not know each other. The interpreter's perception was that the non-Iranians imagined their colleague had a relationship with the Iranian speaker that he had not disclosed. The interpreter regretted translating this '*tarouf* phrase' as the word for word translation could not convey the sense and meaning of the phrase, i.e. that it was 'merely' meant as a compliment. The result was to create a misunderstanding which was cleared up only after much subsequent effort on his part to explain the idea of *tarouf*, and that the phrase should therefore be interpreted as a form of humility and respect. He felt the obvious lack of cultural understanding of what was meant had brought his ability into question. This occurred relatively early in his career, and he consulted more experienced colleagues for advice. The advice he received is of considerable significance to the present article – he was told not to translate *tarouf* phrases in order to avoid such misunderstandings. This example of occupational socialisation, if typical, has important implications for how translators view their role.

International managers' view of the 'problem' of tarouf

The international managers, all of whom are fluent in English and Farsi and therefore did not need interpreters in their work, agreed with the

interpreters that a significant issue was a lack of understanding from both parties – non-Iranians are unaware of *tarouf*, whilst Iranians are so familiar with it that they don't recognise it as something that would be 'foreign' to a visitor. This mutual lack of awareness can create surprising, embarrassing or unpleasant situations. The international managers cited two key areas – a failure to comprehend the full meaning of what is being said, and a difficulty in understanding the difference in attitudes over the separation of business relationships and personal relationships.

An example of the problem of comprehension was offered by a British manager married to an Iranian and living and working in Iran. Although fluent in Farsi, she noted that for the first few years in Iran she was often unclear why people were using certain words in business. Only after she became familiar with the Iranian culture did she recognise that the language was associated with *tarouf* – '*Tarouf* is in everyday life and if you do not understand this issue it seems like you are not polite'. An Iranian manager claimed *tarouf* had no impact on his business and he had no problems dealing with it. However, this manager studied in US, and was very familiar with Western culture. He stated that as 'people in Europe do not understand *tarouf*', he always avoids involving this part of culture in business. Also, as he does business in English there is no reason for him

to use 'tarouf phrases'. We might therefore suggest that this manager does not find *tarouf* to be a problem because he has no expectations that non-Iranians will understand or demonstrate *tarouf*, and he deliberately avoids demonstrating *tarouf* himself. He is therefore quite unlike the typical clients of translators and interpreters.

The issue of a separation between personal and business relationships was described in terms of the link between *tarouf* and what one manager called 'Iranian hospitality culture':

There are two sides to tarouf. First, which is a positive side, when the clients find that we are very hospitable and caring, which is part of our tarouf. The negative part is when, based on the friendship you built with your clients, you expect them to be more accommodating, for example, you do not need to pay cash in advance because you think you were with your English partner last night until two in the morning and you are friends as well as business partners. But in reality, for business men from the UK they do not see it this way.

He noted that he and his Iranian colleagues, when hosting a foreign visitor, would typically go to the airport to collect them, invite them to their homes, and perhaps even buy them gifts when they are leaving. By contrast, when they make the return visit the UK managers leave them to find their own way to the hotel and meetings, and are unlikely to invite them to their homes. As a result he no longer practices *tarouf* to that level with his foreign business partners.

Discussion

Three key themes emerge from our findings. The first is that translators have a clear view on how to handle the issue of untranslatable words. They generally choose either to find the closest approximation in the target language, or to ignore the word altogether. Only when neither option seems possible do they choose to raise the issue of the untranslatable nature of a word or phrase, and on such occasions they will provide an explanation of the cultural context in order to help the audience understand what the author/speaker is attempting to convey. The fact they engage in such explanations only when deemed unavoidable appears to arise from a concern about the impact of this on their professional image. They express the view that any inability to translate

will be perceived by the client to reflect a weakness in their linguistic competence, rather than an issue inherent in the difference of language and culture. In their analysis of intercultural communication research, Bjerregaard, Luring and Klitmøller (2009) suggest cross-cultural management scholars would benefit from drawing upon more recent anthropological literature, from which they derive three theoretical dimensions of culture in communication: “The interrelation between culture and the local context of social, professional or organizational relationships in which communication is conducted...The specific motivations and interests of actors informing the act of invoking cultural identities or categories in communication... Actors’ strategies of communication” (2009: 214). The interpreters’ decision-making behaviour, their interactions with clients, and the resultant impact on communication, can be seen as an illustration of all three dimensions.

The second theme concerns the mutual lack of awareness of the cultural issues encapsulated in the untranslatable word (in this instance, *tarouf*). One of the aspects of the present study which may be particularly important is the point made by the translators, interpreters and managers alike that there is limited knowledge of Iranian culture among Western managers. This makes the difficulties in translating a key word which

captures a critical element of Iranian culture a much greater issue than it might be for a more familiar culture. The difficult relations between Iran and many Western countries (particularly the USA and the UK) has not been conducive to 'knowledge transfer' about Iranian culture, and a point touched upon by some of our participants was the need for Iranians engaged in international business to have a greater awareness of the role of *tarouf*, in order to see their own culture as 'foreigners' see it, and be able to anticipate and handle the cultural misunderstandings. This might seem counter-intuitive, in that one might argue that it is the non-Iranians coming to Iran who need this knowledge, but the participants made the point that in the current climate it is unrealistic to expect the West will be learning more about Iranian culture. (Following Sliwe (2008), we would note that even if the geopolitical situation became more favourable for inter-cultural communication, English remains the 'imperial power' in linguistic terms, and Iranian businesses might still expect to encounter relative ignorance of their language and culture). The importance of understanding one's own cultural identity as a basis for effective inter-cultural business communication is stressed by Jameson (2007). She examines the importance for communication professionals (such as translators and interpreters) of understanding oneself and one's own cultural identity – it is interesting to observe that in our study it was the

Iranian managers, rather than the communication professionals, who had reached the same conclusion.

The third theme concerns the way in which these problems (a lack of accurate translation and a gap in cultural understanding) create the kind of vicious cycle in international business communication identified by Harzing and Feely (2008). At first glance this would seem to reinforce the argument for the adoption of a lingua franca. The participant who appeared to have least issues with *tarouf* was the Iranian manager who worked exclusively in English, and thus avoided the problem of *tarouf* phrases. However, this manager was also educated in an English-speaking country, and therefore fully aware both of *tarouf* and of the 'absence' of an equivalent concept in such countries (and Western countries generally, in his view). His use of English was therefore not the crucial factor, and Iranian managers required to use English would most likely translate *tarouf* phrases into English in their interactions with English-speakers and continue to have expectations of behaviour (their own and others) which draw upon the cultural value of *tarouf*.

Limitations of the study

We presented a rationale for using *tarouf* as an exemplar of an untranslatable but culturally significant word. Though the findings presented here would appear to have relevance to other situations, it is clearly necessary to examine whether the same issues can be seen to arise between other languages and for other words. Our participants identified a relative Western ignorance of Iranian culture as a key factor in making *tarouf* problematic. Perhaps with languages and cultures of which Western business people have a greater awareness, this might make 'untranslatable' words less of an issue. All the translators were native speakers of Farsi, and it would be interesting to examine how English-Farsi linguists who are native speakers of English handle the issue of *tarouf*. One might speculate that they would be less aware of all the complex nuances of *tarouf*, but might be more likely to be aware of it as an important cultural difference and thus more likely to engage in explanation when it arises. So far we have considered the issue from an Iranian perspective, with only limited insights into how much of a problem the native English speakers found it to be. An understanding of this will be important if we are to develop recommendations as to how MNCs, international managers and business communication professionals might address the problem. Finally, as we have noted at various points, the problem appears to be much greater for interpreters than translators, but

the literature on language issues in international business draws heavily upon translation studies rather than interpreting studies. Future research might usefully be informed by this younger discipline, which is starting to pay greater attention to the 'in-between' nature of the interpreter's role (Pochhacker, 2006).

Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of 'untranslatable' words in multi-cultural communications, and the crucial mediating role of the translator/interpreter in international business communication. Our participants' description of their practice reflected elements of all three perspectives on language use – mechanical, cultural and political – described by Janssens et al (2004). Their core practice remained wedded to the mechanical perspective, as they attempted to render documents or speech between Farsi and English as accurately as possible. The 'untranslatable' nature of *tarouf* tested this preferred way of working to its limits, but only in certain circumstances did they choose to provide their clients with the cultural perspective required to understand fully the nature of their business interactions. Their choices demonstrate the significant power dimension of their role, consistent with the political perspective, but

whereas Janssens et al (2004) highlight organisational power dynamics, in this instance it is the professional status and personal business concerns of the translator/interpreter which dominate. Their judgement as to whether or not to offer an explanation of *tarouf* is based upon their view of whether this will enhance or diminish their standing in the eyes of their clients (and by extension, whether or not this will lead to repeat business). This suggests a need for greater attention to the role of the translator, and in particular greater clarity from clients as to what they require. The irony of course is that when dealing with 'untranslatable' words and concepts the clients do not know what they are missing, and are therefore unlikely to see the need to specify their requirements.

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