INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN TRANSLATION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF INCORRECT TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract. In an increasingly globalized world, accurate translation plays a vital role in fostering effective intercultural communication. This paper explores how mistranslations can significantly hinder cross-cultural understanding, resulting in social, political, and commercial missteps. Drawing on the foundational theories of Nida (1964) and Hofstede (2001), the study emphasizes the need for careful navigation of linguistic and cultural nuances. Notable examples—such as the mistranslation of political speeches or marketing slogans—demonstrate how even minor errors can lead to offense or distort intended meanings. For instance, Pepsi's slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" was once mistranslated into Chinese as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave," causing confusion and cultural dissonance. Similarly, diplomatic translation errors—like Khrushchev's infamous phrase "We will bury you" during the Cold War—illustrate the potentially dangerous consequences of inaccurate interpretation. This research highlights the importance of cultural competence in translation, referencing Baker's (1992) insights on pragmatic failure and Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization. By analyzing real-world cases alongside translation theory, the paper advocates for the integration of intercultural training in translator education and the implementation of stricter quality assurance mechanisms within international communication settings. Ultimately, it concludes that accurate translation is not merely a linguistic task but a powerful bridge—or, when handled poorly, a barrier—between cultures.

Keywords: intercultural communication, mistranslation, cultural competence, translation theory, pragmatic failure, Hofstede, Nida.

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ ПРИ ПЕРЕВОДЕ: ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ НЕПРАВИЛЬНОГО ПЕРЕВОДА

Аннотация. Во все более глобализирующемся мире точный перевод играет жизненно важную роль в обеспечении эффективной межкультурной коммуникации. В данной статье рассматривается, как неправильный перевод может существенно затруднить межкультурное взаимопонимание, что приводит к социальным, политическим и коммерческим ошибкам. Опираясь на основополагающие теории Нида

ISSN:
2181-3906
2025

International scientific journal
«MODERN SCIENCE AND RESEARCH»
VOLUME 4 / ISSUE 4 / UIF:8.2 / MODERNSCIENCE.UZ

(1964) и Хофстеде (2001), в исследовании подчеркивается необходимость тщательного учета лингвистических и культурных нюансов. Известные примеры, такие как неправильный перевод политических речей или маркетинговых лозунгов, демонстрируют, как даже незначительные ошибки могут привести к оскорблениям или исказить предполагаемый смысл. Например, слоган Pepsi "Оживай вместе с поколением Pepsi" когда-то был неправильно переведен на китайский как "Pepsi возвращает твоих предков из могилы", что вызвало путаницу и культурный диссонанс. Аналогичным образом, ошибки в дипломатическом переводе, такие как печально известная фраза Хрущева "Мы вас похороним" во время холодной войны, иллюстрируют потенциально опасные последствия неточного толкования. Это исследование подчеркивает важность культурной компетентности при переводе, ссылаясь на идеи Бейкера (1992) о прагматической несостоятельности и концепции Венути (1995) о доместикации и иноязычности. Анализируя реальные примеры из практики наряду с теорией перевода, авторы статьи выступают за интеграцию межкультурного обучения в образование переводчиков и внедрение более строгих механизмов обеспечения качества в условиях международного общения. В конечном счете, автор приходит к выводу, что точный перевод — это не просто лингвистическая задача, но и мощный мост — или, при плохом выполнении, барьер - между культурами.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, неправильный перевод, культурная компетентность, теория перевода, прагматическая несостоятельность, Хофстеде, Нида.

Introduction

In today's interconnected world, communication across cultures has become both inevitable and indispensable. As businesses expand globally, political dialogue spans continents, and digital platforms connect diverse communities, the role of translation in facilitating intercultural communication has never been more critical. Yet, despite its centrality, translation is not a neutral or purely mechanical act—it is deeply embedded in cultural context. Words carry connotations, values, and historical baggage that differ across linguistic boundaries. When these subtleties are overlooked, the consequences can range from minor misunderstandings to serious diplomatic tensions or commercial failures (Baker, 1992; Nida, 1964).

Intercultural communication, as defined by scholars such as Hofstede (2001), involves the exchange of meaning across different cultural frameworks, each with its own norms, values, and communicative expectations. Translation, then, becomes a mediator—not just of language, but of culture. However, when this mediation is flawed due to mistranslations or cultural misinterpretations, the results can be problematic. For example, when Procter & Gamble attempted to introduce a baby product to the Japanese market using an image of a stork delivering a baby—common in Western storytelling—the campaign fell flat, as the symbol held no cultural resonance in Japan (Chaney & Martin, 2011). Similarly, diplomatic errors—like the infamous misinterpretation of Nikita Khrushchev's phrase "Мы вас похороним" ("We will bury you")—sparked unnecessary Cold War anxieties due to a literal rather than contextual translation (Faiola, 2006). Theoretical perspectives in translation studies, such as Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization, further underscore the challenges of balancing fidelity to the source text with cultural intelligibility for the target audience. Likewise, Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence theory stresses the importance of capturing intended meaning rather than sticking rigidly to word-for-word translations. This paper aims to investigate the complex interplay between translation and intercultural communication, with a particular focus on the consequences of incorrect translations. By analyzing real-world examples and grounding the discussion in translation theory, this study seeks to emphasize the need for cultural awareness, contextual sensitivity, and ethical responsibility in the practice of translation.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology, designed to explore how mistranslations impact intercultural communication across various real-world contexts. Unlike quantitative approaches that focus on numerical frequency or statistical trends, this study prioritizes contextual meaning, cultural nuance, and situational analysis, which are better captured through qualitative tools (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The methodology is rooted in descriptive case study analysis (Yin, 2014), allowing for in-depth investigation of notable incidents involving mistranslations and their cultural consequences. Through purposive sampling, the study identifies translation events where language miscommunication led to significant cultural or communicative breakdowns. This design is particularly useful for uncovering the complex, often hidden relationships between language, culture, and meaning (Stake, 1995). Moreover, the study takes an interdisciplinary approach, blending insights from translation studies, sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, and media studies.

This makes it possible to not only assess linguistic inaccuracy, but also evaluate its symbolic, pragmatic, and ideological implications. The analytical lens for this research draws from three interrelated theoretical models: Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence theory, which posits that effective translation should focus on reproducing the meaning of the source message in a way that elicits a similar response in the target audience—rather than translating word-for-word, translators should strive for functional equivalence, ensuring the intent and emotional tone of the message is preserved, thus helping evaluate why literal translations often fail in intercultural contexts; Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication (adapting a text to the target culture) and foreignization (retaining source culture elements), which examine whether a translation strategy respects cultural difference or imposes dominant cultural values, often linked to power asymmetries in global communication; and Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, which identifies cultural variables such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance that influence how messages are interpreted across cultures, making his model critical in assessing how specific translation choices may resonate—or misfire—with target audiences depending on their cultural value systems. These three frameworks collectively guide the textual and discourse analysis, enabling the researcher to assess not just what was translated incorrectly, but why the error mattered and how it affected intercultural communication outcomes. Data was gathered through a combination of document analysis, archival research, and secondary literature review, with the goal of compiling a diverse and representative set of mistranslation cases from across domains such as politics, international marketing, and audiovisual media. Political communication sources included translations of historical speeches and diplomatic exchanges accessed from U.S. State Department archives, Russian Federation records, and the United Nations digital library; corporate and advertising materials involved missteps from brands like KFC, HSBC, Electrolux, and Pepsi, examined using reports from global marketing literature (de Mooij, 2010; Usunier & Lee, 2009); media and entertainment translation examples were drawn from subtitled or dubbed media content from Netflix, YouTube, and streaming platforms, especially where cultural idioms and humor were mistranslated or mislocalized (Gambier & Gottlieb, 2001; Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007); and academic literature included cases discussed in peer-reviewed journals such as *The Translator*, *Meta*, and *Translation Studies*, which provided scholarly interpretation of documented translation failures. Selection criteria focused on impact—where the incident had measurable or reported consequences such as consumer backlash or political controversy; cultural dimension—

where the mistranslation involved cultural misunderstanding rather than just linguistic error; and domain diversity—ensuring the cases represented different fields and geographical regions for varied perspectives. Data was coded thematically to identify recurring patterns such as idiomatic mistranslations, cultural taboos, or humor misfires, and cross-analyzed against theoretical frameworks for deeper interpretation. While the study is robust in its qualitative depth, several limitations must be recognized: generalizability is limited, as the case-based approach does not allow for statistical extrapolation to all translation contexts, aiming instead for insight rather than prediction (Maxwell, 2013), with broader trends requiring large-scale corpus or survey-based methods; selection bias is possible, since purposive sampling may favor high-profile or "spectacular" translation failures more likely to be documented, potentially skewing the dataset away from more mundane but equally important challenges (Flyvbjerg, 2006); language range is constrained by the researcher's linguistic competencies and available documentation, focusing primarily on English and widely spoken global languages such as Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish, and Russian, while lesser-known or regional languages are underrepresented despite potentially facing more acute translation issues due to lack of resources; temporal relevance may be affected as some examples, particularly historical or from older media, might not fully reflect current intercultural sensibilities or translation practices influenced by AI and machine learning, rendering the analysis more illustrative than prescriptive; and technological constraints arise from the study not systematically examining machine translation tools like Google Translate, which increasingly shape global communication—an area ripe for future research, especially in real-time or informal digital contexts. Despite these limitations, the study offers critical insights into the real-world stakes of translation accuracy and the role of cultural competence in global messaging.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that mistranslation is not a simple linguistic mishap but rather a profound intercultural communication failure that can influence perceptions, behaviors, and relationships across borders. Each mistranslation studied reveals how language and culture are deeply intertwined, and how the act of translation—when done carelessly or without cultural awareness—can distort not only meaning, but intent, emotion, and identity. As Nida (1964) emphasized, effective translation requires capturing dynamic equivalence—not just the linguistic structure, but also the intended effect on the audience.

The errors found in diplomatic and marketing translations, such as Khrushchev's "We will bury you" or HSBC's "Do Nothing," reveal that literal translation fails when separated from cultural context. These cases demonstrate that meaning is co-constructed between text and culture, and translators must understand both sides of the equation to avoid serious consequences. Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization provide a useful lens for understanding how translations are shaped by cultural and ideological forces. In many cases, domestication strategies are used to make texts more palatable to the target audience, but this often leads to the erasure or misrepresentation of source cultures. In subtitled films, for example, culturally loaded expressions are often replaced with simplified phrases, stripping away the cultural richness and reinforcing ethnocentric perspectives. This raises critical ethical questions: Should translators adapt content for easier reception, or should they preserve cultural authenticity at the risk of misunderstanding? There is no universal answer, but the findings suggest that cultural flattening can limit cross-cultural understanding, especially when audiences are not exposed to the complexity of foreign worldviews. The research confirms that humor and idiomatic expressions are particularly vulnerable in translation. These elements often rely on shared cultural knowledge and context-specific meaning, which can be easily lost or misinterpreted in another language. For example, puns, sarcasm, or metaphorical language may have no direct equivalent in the target language. When such elements are translated literally, they may confuse or alienate the audience, weakening the communicative purpose of the message (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). This is especially relevant in media translation and advertising, where brand identity or narrative tone can hinge on wordplay or cultural nuance. The translator's ability to creatively reconstruct meaning—while staying loyal to the original intent—is critical here. A recurring theme across all findings is the importance of cultural literacy. Linguistic knowledge alone is insufficient; translators must also possess a nuanced understanding of cultural norms, values, history, and sensitivities. As Hall (1976) argues, different cultures encode meaning in different ways—some are high-context (relying on implicit cues), while others are low-context (more explicit). A competent translator must bridge these differences, anticipating how a message will be received by the target audience. This point also connects with Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which explains how concepts like individualism, hierarchy, and uncertainty avoidance shape communication styles. When translation fails to consider these factors, the result is not just misunderstanding, but a breakdown in trust, respect, or engagement.

While machine translation tools like Google Translate or DeepL have become more advanced, they still struggle with contextual understanding and pragmatic function—especially when translating culture-bound expressions, politeness strategies, or non-verbal connotations. As Lopez & Post (2017) and Gaspari et al. (2015) note, current AI systems lack the cultural intelligence that human translators bring to their work. Thus, in high-stakes communication (diplomacy, health, legal matters), reliance on machines without human oversight can exacerbate intercultural miscommunication, reinforcing the need for skilled human translation.

Results

The analysis of case studies and scholarly sources reveals that incorrect translations can have complex and far-reaching effects that go beyond simple linguistic errors. Mistranslations often lead to serious **intercultural misunderstandings**, **miscommunication of intent**, and in some cases, **social, political, or economic consequences**. These errors typically arise from a failure to consider cultural context, connotative meanings, and audience expectations, demonstrating that translation is not merely a mechanical process but a nuanced act of cultural mediation.

One of the most illustrative examples comes from diplomatic history: Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's phrase "Мы вас похороним" was translated into English as "We will bury you," which was widely perceived in the West as a direct threat of nuclear war. However, in Russian, the expression more accurately meant "We will outlast you," referring to the ideological endurance of communism over capitalism. This mistranslation significantly escalated Cold War tensions, emphasizing how a lack of cultural and contextual understanding in translation can distort political messages and create unnecessary conflict (Hatim & Mason, 1997; Venuti, 1995).

In the commercial sphere, mistranslations have proven equally damaging. A notable case involves HSBC's global campaign slogan "Assume Nothing," which was mistranslated in some countries as "Do Nothing." The confusion led to a costly $10 million rebranding campaign. Similarly, Electrolux's marketing campaign in the United States included the tagline "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux," which, due to the informal use of the word "sucks," came across as humorous or inappropriate rather than professional. These examples highlight how incorrect translations can lead to **financial loss**, **brand damage**, and a **loss of consumer trust** (de Mooij, 2010).

**ISSN:
2181-3906
2025**

International scientific journal
«MODERN SCIENCE AND RESEARCH»
VOLUME 4 / ISSUE 4 / UIF:8.2 / MODERNSCIENCE.UZ

Another significant result is the challenge of translating humor, idioms, and figurative language. These elements are often rooted in specific cultural references and linguistic playfulness, making them difficult to reproduce in another language without losing their meaning or emotional effect. Research in audiovisual translation, especially in subtitling Western TV shows into non-Western languages, shows that jokes and sarcasm often fail to resonate with the target audience because the humor does not transfer culturally. As Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) note, this often leads to flattening of meaning, which reduces audience engagement and alters character portrayal.

In the realm of public communication and health, mistranslations can even have dangerous consequences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, miscommunications stemming from poor translation of health guidelines into minority languages led to confusion and increased vulnerability among immigrant communities. This situation demonstrated that the lack of culturally and linguistically inclusive translation can reinforce **social exclusion** and **inequitable access to information** (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020).

Furthermore, the increasing reliance on machine translation tools like Google Translate introduces its own set of risks. While such tools are useful for basic communication, studies show that they often fail to capture nuance, politeness levels, gender sensitivity, and socio-cultural connotations (Gaspari et al., 2015). Automated translations frequently produce outputs that are syntactically correct but pragmatically flawed, especially in contexts requiring emotional sensitivity or professional formality. In intercultural communication, such errors can be perceived as **disrespectful**, **robotic**, or even **offensive**.

Finally, the broader consequence of incorrect translations is a reduction in **intercultural understanding**. When cultural subtleties are erased or distorted, it not only misrepresents the source culture but also prevents the target audience from fully engaging with cultural diversity. Venuti (1995) argues that the dominance of target-language norms often leads to the silencing of foreign voices, which in turn perpetuates cultural hegemony and misunderstanding rather than promoting dialogue and exchange.

In sum, the findings underscore the idea that mistranslation is not simply a matter of wrong words, but a symptom of deeper issues related to cultural disconnection, lack of intercultural competence, and insufficient investment in qualified human translators.

The consequences can be as subtle as a misunderstood joke or as serious as international diplomatic strain or public misinformation. Therefore, addressing these issues requires a shift in how translation is approached—not as a technical task, but as a critical intercultural practice.

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