

Meaning loss in translation: The What, Why, and How. A Case Of Vietnamese – English Translation

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A certain degree of meaning loss in translation is unavoidable, since languages differ from one another. Even between very close languages such as British English and American English disparity in certain linguistic domains still exists. The more disparate a domain between any two languages, the bigger the degree of meaning loss is likely to result in translation. The degree of meaning loss is also dependent on the method of translation adopted. The target language (TL) oriented approach, which is a popular method, may play a role in overlooking certain aspects of meaning of the source text (TT) if this meaning is conveyed by linguistic elements that are alien to the target language, since TL-oriented translation allows the tailoring of the source message to the linguistic needs and cultural expectations of the receptors.

This paper investigates a particular domain of Vietnamese language that is likely to cause a certain degree of meaning loss in the translation from Vietnamese to English, examining the attributing role of translation approaches to the loss of meaning, and proposing suggestions for minimizing the meaning loss in the translation of this domain. The linguistic domain under investigation is the Vietnamese system of address and reference.

The data used in the paper includes two short stories and a chapter from each of the two novels written in Vietnamese and their English translation. Analysis of the use and meaning of the terms of address and reference used in the ST and how they were conveyed in the English translation reveals that close adherence to the TL resulted in the loss of subtle meaning manipulated merely by the use of various Vietnamese terms of address and reference. Suggestions to minimize the meaning loss are accordingly proposed.



Thanh NGO is in the final stage of her PhD candidature at the University of Western Australia. Her PhD thesis examines the translation of temporal and aspectual information from Vietnamese to English and vice versa as used in narrative texts. Her Master thesis, which was finished in 2006, also at UWA, investigated the translation of terms of address and reference from Vietnamese to English.