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The Intercultural Question and the Interpreting Professions

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Translating tourism promotional texts: translation quality and its relationship to the commissioning process

Novriyanto Napu

Abstract

Poor translation quality has often been associated with the translators' low level of proficiency in either the source or the target language. In addition, the translator's poor awareness and understanding of the purpose of the translation has also played a role. This may be the case when the translation commissioners fail to define and specify the purpose of the translation in the translation brief, which may influence the way the translator determines the strategies for translating the texts. The studies on the role of the translation commissioning process in translation have, however, remained limited. The aim of this paper is to examine the translation quality of tourism texts and the extent to which the translation commissioning process influences quality, with particular reference to the Indonesian context. Two sets of data have been used in this study; a corpus of six bilingual (Indonesian-English) tourism brochures officially produced by the Tourism Board of Gorontalo, Indonesia, and interviews with the tourism professionals involved in the commissioning process. The paper argues that an inadequate commissioning process has a significant impact on the quality of translation.

1. Introduction: context of the study

As in many other countries, the tourism industry in Indonesia has played an important role in contributing to the development of the country's economy. The Indonesian Ministry of Tourism (2011) states that the tourism sector has become one of the fastest growing industries. According to data from the Ministry of Tourism (2011), in 2009 the

tourism sector became the third largest sector of the economy after mining, oil and gas.

In developing promotional strategies, the Indonesian tourism industry has been working together with international media to promote and showcase the image of Indonesian tourism sites using the slogan "Wonderful Indonesia". Another strategy to boost tourism has been to offer visa-free travel to tourists coming from a number of countries. In 2015, more than 110 countries were given visa-free travel to Indonesia for tourism and business purposes, and this number was expected to increase to 174 countries in 2016 (Kertopati 2015). Given the emphasis that the government in Indonesia has been placing on tourism and the investment being made, it is essential to consider the quality of the promotional products that are being developed alongside such strategies.

Gorontalo province, established in 2001, is located in the northern part of Sulawesi Island. As a relatively new autonomous province in Eastern Indonesia, Gorontalo could be considered as a newcomer in the tourism industry. Since the establishment of a Tourism Board in 2003, the provincial government has been trying to promote and develop local tourism. Compared to other areas in Indonesia, Gorontalo has not yet attracted a large number of tourists. This may be due to a combination of its geographical position in the northern part of Sulawesi Island and the lack of institutional attention to the tourism industry in the past. However, the local government has recently started to focus on developing the industry.

One strategy that the Tourism Board of Gorontalo has used in promoting the industry has been to produce promotional materials, such as brochures and tourism videos containing clips of tourist attractions in Gorontalo. These brochures are written initially in Indonesian and are then translated into English with a view to reaching international markets.

Although translation is very common in the tourism industry, translations of tourism texts have generally been criticised because of their poor quality. This aspect, commented on extensively in Translation Studies research (e.g. Kelly 1998; Milton & Garbi 2000; Ko 2010; Ma & Song's 2011; Muñoz 2012; Sulaiman 2013), inevitably weakens the ability of tourism texts to achieve their purpose of enticing and attracting readers. Given that problems with the quality of tourist translations have been commonly reported in many parts of the world and given the importance of translation in the Gorontalo Tourism Board's communication with international audiences, it is timely to consider the quality of the

translations being produced. This paper therefore sets out to examine the quality of the translations used to promote tourism in Gorontalo, Indonesia.

2. Previous studies of tourist translation

Studies of tourist translation have explored the issue of translation quality in many different aspects. A number of studies report on findings regarding linguistic problems, including grammatical problems (e.g. Milton & Garbi 2000; Ma & Song's 2011; Muñoz 2012; Liu & Wen 2014), semantic problems (Valdeon 2009; He & Tao 2010; Wang 2011; Ma & Song 2011; Guo 2012; Liu & Wen 2014), stylistic (Wang 2011; Sulaiman 2013) and spelling problems (e.g. Ko 2010, 2012; Wang 2011; Liu and Wen 2014). These studies argue that these kinds of problems can be attributed to the limited English competence of the translators.

Apart from problems relating to linguistic features, other studies have also explored the translation of cultural features in tourism texts. The most common problems here include a number of mistranslations of cultural items, such as the translation of proper nouns, names of historical places and events as shown in studies of corpora of Chinese-English tourist translations (Ma & Song 2011; Wang 2011; Bin 2013) and in studies of Spanish-English translations (Valdeon 2009; Merkaĵ 2013). This suggests that cultural problems in translation may be associated with the translator's focus on the linguistic aspects of the text, with less awareness on the cultural meanings in the translation process.

A small number of studies have considered readers' responses in evaluating the quality of translations of tourism texts (Nobs-Federer 2006; Sulaiman 2013, 2014). Sulaiman (2013, 2014) for instance, considers how translations into Malay of Australian promotional materials about the Gold Coast appeal to target audience readers. The overall responses to the texts from the Malay speakers revealed that the Malay translations were unappealing, awkward and hard to understand because the stylistic features of the target text had been transferred literally from the source text.

Other studies have examined the features of source language texts to see how they relate to the quality of target texts (Valdeon 2009; Sulaiman 2013). These studies conclude that often the problems in the target language may result from badly written source texts.

2.1 Studies of tourist translation in Indonesia

There have been few studies of tourist translation in Indonesia and there are only a small number of published studies focusing on the translation of tourism texts from Indonesian into English (Permadi & Prayogo 2012; Hartati 2013; Puspitasari et al. 2013). These studies, mostly analysing linguistic issues, have looked at translation problems by examining and comparing source and target language corpora. They have highlighted problems involving grammatical errors (Permadi & Prayogo 2012; Hartati 2013; Puspitasari et al. 2013), such as the omission of definite and indefinite articles, the omission of plural marking on nouns, and on verbs in the third singular person. They have also identified spelling and punctuation errors (Permadi & Prayogo 2012; Hartati 2013), which shows evidence of a lack of attention to the editing and revision process. The translation errors identified in these studies appear to be low level linguistic errors and this is similar to the findings of other studies outside Indonesia (e.g. Milton & Garbi 2000; Ma & Song's 2011; Muñoz 2012; Liu & Wen 2014). Though interesting and revealing, the Indonesian studies have not considered why such problems appear. They have mostly attributed these problems to the use of a literal approach to translation but have not considered other factors that may be relevant, such as the impact of the commissioning process on the translation quality. This aspect has received scant attention in scholarly work.

3. Method

The aim of the study upon which this paper is based was to investigate the quality of tourist translations from Indonesian into English and to consider the potential influence of the associated commissioning process. It was designed and carried out through a qualitative case study examining the quality of translated tourism texts produced by the provincial Tourism Board of Gorontalo in Indonesia.

3.1 The data

In the original study a set of official publications of tourism brochures was used as the corpus for the analysis. Six tourism brochures were examined. Each brochure was written in Indonesian with a parallel English

translation. The analysis focussed on the nature of the English translation errors as the basis of understanding the quality of the translations.

An interview was carried out with the tourism professionals at the Gorontalo Tourism Board. The aim of examining the translation commissioning process was to examine how those involved understood and carried out the process and how this impacted on the quality of translation. A total of six professionals were interviewed. A semi-structured interview was used. The interview was carried out through a set of predetermined open-ended questions, which were supplemented with more questions as the interviews were held with the participants.

The questions revolved around four main issues relating to the commissioning process. The first question focused on how the participants understood the purpose of translation. As Vermeer (1989) and Nord (1997; 2014) have argued the purpose is fundamental to translation quality. Consequently, it is important to understand the purpose as the starting point for the commissioning process. The second question was about the process used to select translators to find out what procedures and criteria were used in selecting translators. The third question focused on how the participants communicated the purpose and other aspects of the translation task to the translators. Functionalist translation theory claims that the translation brief is an important element in the translation process, and thus this question looked at how the Tourism Board provides information and instructions to translators. The last question focused on how the participants carried out quality assurance. As outlined earlier, the literature on tourist translation in Indonesia has shown that there are problems with texts translated from Indonesian into a foreign language. Scholars such as Chesterman (1997) and Adab (2005) have argued that in contexts where translation into the second language is the norm, quality assurance should be even more important.

4. Translation quality

This section will analyse the translation quality of the set of tourism texts comprising the data. The translation problems examined here belong to two main categories, i.e. linguistic problems and cultural problems. The analysis will give but a selection of prototypical examples that are evident in the entire corpus.

4.1 Linguistic problems

4.1.1 Syntactic errors

The syntactic problems analysed relate to problems with grammatical structures. There are many instances of syntactic problems identified in the text.

Omission of grammatical items

- 1) Omission of 'to be' as an auxiliary verb or copula
"This island (is) located in North Gorontalo regency" (*pulau ini terletak di Kabupaten Gorontalo Utara*).
- 2) Omission of articles
"Otanaha fortress was built in 1525 by (the) Portugesse [sic]" (*Benteng Otanaha dibangun sekitar tahun 1525 oleh Portugis*).

Word form problems

- 1) Omission of possession marker
"...when Gorontalo became transit harbour of Ternate kingdom and Goa kingdom (s) marine force" (*pada saat itu Gorontalo menjadi pelabuhan transit angkutan laut kerajaan Ternate dan Goa*).
- 2) Omission of plural marker
"They said that many sea creatures in this area cannot be found in other sea(s)" (*mereka mengatakan bahwa banyak jenis binatang laut di daerah ini tidak dapat ditemukan di laut lainnya*).

Syntactic problems

"The uniqueness of this village (is) since the settlements that are above the sea with a population 1.710 people with livelihoods as fishermen".
(*Keunikan dari perkampungan ini karena letak pemukimannya yang berada diatas air laut, dengan jumlah penduduk 1.710 jiwa yang bermata pencaharian sebagai nelayan*).

In this example, apart from the missing verb 'to be', the English looks unnatural as the result of a literal (word for word) translation of the source language text. The words in this sentence have the same order as the sentence in the source text: *keunikan* (uniqueness) *dari* (of) *perkampungan ini* (this village) *karena* (since) *pemukimannya* (the settlements) *yang berada* (that

are) *diatas* (above) *air laut* (laut).

4.1.2 Semantic problems

Semantic problems are concerned with word meaning and may involve problems with lexical choices and the translation of idiomatic expressions. A good example of this problem can be seen below:

“Otanaha fortress was built in 1525 by Portuguesse. In 1623 it was found by Naha from Tuwawa kingdom (Suwawa) and named as the founder, Ota: fortress, Naha: benteng” [sic].

(Otanaha dibangun sekitar tahun 1525 oleh Portugis. Pada tahun 1623 benteng ini ditemukan oleh naha dari kerajaan Tuwawa (Suwawa) dan diberi nama Otanaha yang berasal dari namanya; Ota:benteng, Naha).

The word ‘founder’ is problematic because the idea in this passage is that Naha is the ‘finder’ of the fortress not the person who originally built it (founder). This seems to be due to a confusion of two related English words with different meanings, that is ‘finder’ and ‘founder’, and may result from the influence of the earlier use of the verb ‘found’. This problem may also result from issues with spelling given the similarities of the two words.

The discussion above has shown that there are a number of translation problems in the texts. Most of the linguistic problems identified have also been found in other studies of tourist translations (e.g. Ma & Song 2011; Muñoz 2012; Permadi & Prayogo 2012; Hartati 2013; Puspitasari, et.al 2013; Liu & Wen 2014). These problems are likely to be the result of the translator’s limited English language abilities. Problems in the translations also seem to be caused by a literal (word for word) translation strategy that has been used throughout the text and this suggests the translator’s lack of translation competence (Kelly 1998; Muñoz 2012).

4.1.3 Cultural reference problems

Cultural reference problems are related to the ways that culture-related items in the source text are adapted or mediated in the target text to enable comprehension for the target text readers. An example of cultural reference issues found in the texts is the following:

“There are rare animals such as Babi Rusa and Anoa”
(*Terdapat binatang langka seperti Babi Rusa dan Anoa*).

The words *babi rusa* and *anoa* do not have translation equivalents in English. The translator has therefore left these words untranslated but this does not communicate information about the referents to a target text reader, for whom these animal names will not be familiar. However, some mediational work in this context, such as adding extra information to these animal names, which Liddicoat (2015) has called ‘expansion’, could have overcome the issue and enabled comprehension by the target language audience: for example adding a description of the animal as in *babi rusa* (a type of wild pig) and *anoa* (a small water buffalo). This strategy would support the target readers who do not share the same knowledge of the context as that of the source language readers. The addition of information helps to achieve the text’s purpose by clarifying the meaning of implicit source text information (Liddicoat 2015). This kind of translator intervention is useful to create a fuller comprehension of the text for the target audience. Such additions mean that the translator functions as a mediator (Katan 2009; Liddicoat 2015), that is as somebody who facilitates communication and understanding between one group and another with respect to language and culture.

The translation problems provide evidence of the use of a literal translation approach and a lack of mediational work in the texts, and this indicates that the translator had limited translation competence or lacked familiarity with translation practices. Kelly (1998) and Muñoz (2012) have also argued that problems in tourist translation reflect translators’ lack of translation competence. This suggests that there are problems with the selection of translators in the commissioning process, which will be discussed further in the next section.

5. The commissioning process

The aim of examining the translation commissioning process was to examine how those involved in the commissioning process understood and carried out the process and how this impacted on the quality of translation. This involved a visit to the Tourism Board in Gorontalo, Indonesia to collect information through interviews about the process of commissioning translations from a group of tourism professionals.

This section will provide a discussion of the research findings that

explore how the commissioning process of translation influences the level of translation quality. A selection of extracts with detailed commentary is provided to consider this aspect of translation quality.

5.1 The purpose of translation

This section outlines how tourism staff members understand and articulate the purpose that underpins the translation work commissioned by the Tourism Board in Gorontalo. The following is an extract from the interview carried out with one of the tourism professionals.

“Sasarannya untuk peningkatan kunjungan wisman. Mereka butuh informasi dalam Bahasa Inggris. Bahasa Inggris adalah bahasa internasional jadi semua bisa membaca dan memahami”.

(The aim [of the translation] is to increase foreign visitors' visits. They need tourism information written in English. English is an international language and so all people can read and understand it).

This quote shows that the participant understood the purpose of the translation to be tourism promotion that will increase the number of visitors coming to Gorontalo from outside Indonesia. This shows that the translated brochures were designed specifically for international tourism promotion.

The quote also shows that the target audience has been understood in a general sense as people who come from any foreign country regardless of their linguistic and cultural background. This understanding of the audience is linked to how the participant understood the international role of English and its diffusion in the world, assuming that if the information is available in English, it will meet the needs of any audience. This shows that English is perceived as a lingua franca, a 'vehicular language' (Stewart 2013), for all visitors regardless of linguistic or cultural background.

The purpose of the translation can only be specified once the target readers have been identified and defined (Nord 1997, 2014). Instead, the very general framing of the target audience shows that the process has not been mindful (Katan 2014) in that the translators have not taken an account of the readers and have focused only on the text.

5.2 Selection of translators

This section examines the nature of the selection process for translators and the criteria that the Tourism Board employs when selecting translators for their texts. The following extract represents the perspective of one staff member, who also happens to be one of the translators chosen for the translation work.

“Karena kebetulan mereka tau saya lulusan dari sastra Inggris walaupun tidak semua lulusan sastra Inggris itu jago Bahasa Inggris karena kita tidak belajar Bahasa Inggris di jurusan itu. Cuma mau gak mau karena mungkin kita sudah terbiasa mendengar, berbicara dan berdiskusi dalam Bahasa Inggris, mungkin karena itu mereka memilih saya”.

(It was because they know that I am an English literature graduate although not all graduates of English literature are good at English because we did not learn English language in that major. But, perhaps we are used to listening, speaking and conversing in English, which may be the reason they chose me to be the translator.)

This staff member reveals that she was appointed as one of the translators on the basis of her degree in English literature. The assumption is that, if a person has studied English literature, she must be familiar with the English language and so must be able to translate. In other words, having translation competence is seen as being the same as having a degree related to the target language or having a familiarity with the target language. This shows that the commissioner’s understanding of translation competence is based only on the idea of being able to speak the target language.

The discussion above reveals that there is no specialised procedure for selecting a translator. The process does not check whether the translator can deliver the quality translation service they need. There is a lack of understanding that a competent translator should have not only target language ability or qualifications but also other capabilities such as textual, subject, cultural and transfer competence (Neubert 2000).

5.3 Translation brief

The translation brief consists of the instructions or specifications given by

a client to the translator to carry out a translation work (Vermeer 1989; Palumbo 2009). Nord (1997, 2014) argues that the translation brief specifies the kind of translation needed by the client to suit the target audience. The following extract is from the staff member who was once appointed as the in-house translator describing the nature of the translation brief in the commissioning process:

“Sebenarnya tidak pernah ada. Sejaub ini tidak ada panduan saat kita melakukan terjemahan. Cuma yang pasti kepala seksi memberi perintah tugas tersebut harus mengandung unsur-unsur promosi”.

([As for translation guidelines] actually there have never been any. So far, there have never been guidelines when we are doing the translation. The head of the [tourism promotion] section gives an instruction that [the translation task] must contain promotional elements).

This staff member/translator reveals that she has never been given any guidelines except that the translation brief should contain promotional content. There appear not to be any details regarding the translation brief, such as the purpose of the translation, its intended text functions, recipients or text meaning (Vermeer 1989; Nord 1997, 2014).

So, it can be said that there was no actual translation brief designed and provided to the translator. Without having a formal commissioning process it is hard for the Tourism Board to check whether the translation has met the aims and purpose of the translation as given in the translation brief.

5.4 Translation quality assurance

This section explores the nature of the quality assurance process and how the Tourism Board checks the quality upon receiving the translation from their translators before proceeding to publication. The following extracts are from two staff members providing information about how the process of quality assurance was carried out.

Extract 1

“Gabung dengan pimpinan. Ada juga teman atau tamu yang kebetulan bisa Bahasa Inggris maka kita minta bantuan untuk dibaca dan dikoreksi. Siapa saja yang bisa berbahasa Inggris saling membantu”.

(We work with the Head of the Tourism Board. There are also friends or guests who happen to be able to speak English and are asked to read and review the translation. Anyone who is able to speak English helps in correcting the translation).

The extract above shows that the way the quality assurance process is done may involve random checking of the texts by people from outside the Tourism Board who are considered to be competent: *'teman atau tamu'* (friends or guests). The translation is reviewed and checked randomly and voluntarily by anyone with English language skills who happens to be in the office. This further suggests that the quality check is an informal ad hoc process using whatever expertise in English language which happens to be available at the time. This quote also suggests that the ability to check a translation is understood only in terms of competence in the target language.

Extract 2

“Setelah diterjemahkan dari Bahasa Indonesianya, saya minta persetujuan kepala seksi dan kepala Dinas. Kadang mungkin ada beberapa kata yang kepala Dinas rasa kurang cocok, misalnya penggunaan kata – kata tertentu yang mungkin tidak sesuai menurut pimpinan”.

(After the texts are translated from the Indonesian, I seek approval from the Head of Section and the Head of the Tourism Board. At times, there are some words that the Head feels are not suitable, such as some word choices).

This quote, from another staff member, shows that the quality check is considered as being primarily an approval process involving those with higher positions in the Tourism Board. Although it is stated that the head of department may review the texts, again it is only minor language aspects that are reviewed, such as lexical choices. The quality checking process involves an administrative process in which the translation draft must be approved by two heads of the section and of the Tourism Board before publication. This quality check is carried out by second language speakers who may have a lower level of English than the translators themselves. In this process, a number of minor corrections may be made in terms of language. This indicates that the process of quality assurance is more an

administrative process rather than a quality checking process.

There seems to be confusion between quality checking and the overall approval process, with those in authority seeing these as the same thing. The Head of the Tourism Board does the approval process, and it is also assumed that s/he had the responsibility to perform a quality check. This sort of quality check contrasts with the recommendation that the involvement of native speakers of English is needed to check if the language is natural-sounding and to guarantee the quality of the translation prior to publication (Chesterman 1997; Adab 2005).

6. Conclusion

Looking at the quality of the translations, there are a number of findings from the analysis of the commissioning process that are related to the reasons for the poor quality of the translation. The lack of understanding of the purpose of the translations appears to have significantly influenced the understandings of other processes in commissioning the translations. The lack of clarity about the purpose has impacted on the translation brief. The translator worked without sufficient guidelines about what was needed from the translation, which affected decisions regarding translation strategies. There is also a limited understanding of translation competence, which influenced the way translator was selected. Translation competence was understood as having the ability to speak the target language. So, instead of selecting people who were qualified as translators, the selection process has chosen people who had qualifications in English.

In addition, the quality assurance process was not rigorous and the translations were not carefully checked. The process of quality assurance was conflated with the final approval process by the Head of the Board, and the translation checks were done in-house by anyone who was considered able to speak English.

In conclusion, the findings of the study suggest that in understanding the quality of translation in the tourism domain it is not enough to simply examine the errors in the texts which show translators' ability in translation, as has been the case in a large number of studies. This present study suggests that it is important to focus on the entire translation process including significantly the commissioning process as this is crucial to the issue of translation quality, especially in the context of a developing tourism industry.

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