The Challenges of Translating an Ethnic Ritual Text of Mandailing

Syahron Lubis
Umar Mono
Linguistics Postgraduate Program
Universitas Sumatera Utara
ronlubis@yahoo.com

Abstract
The aim of the study was to show how to translate a cultural text of Mandailing: a ritual text recited at a wedding ceremony of the society, into English. Meaning-based translation method had been applied to translate the text called *mangupa*. Due to the vast linguistic differences between the source language (SL) (Mandailingnese) and the target language (TL) (English) a number of linguistically-related translation problems were encountered. And due to the great differences between SL cultures and TL cultures a number of culturally-related translation problems were found ranging from untranslatable items to items which could be translated literally into the TL but need explanation. Since the text did not only consist of prose text but also verses a various translation techniques must be used to translate the 37 verses in order to achieve not only meaning equivalents but also to create the rhymes of the translated verses. It was found that the structure of phrases, compound words and sentences in the SL and the TL were so different and thus caused translation problems. Subjects of sentences, numbers and conjunctions which were sometimes implicit in the SL must be made explicit in the translation. A certain word category in the SL might correspond to a different word category in the TL and thus they caused shift. Since the *mangupa* text is a classic text, there were many archaic words whose meanings were untranslatable. Since tenses do not exist in the SL they caused special translation problems to translate the text into the TL which has tenses. In order to achieve the rhymes of the translated verses, the following translation techniques must be used: transposition, addition, generalization, alteration, explication, modulation, concretization and transcreation.

Key words: source language/text, target language/text, equivalents, untranslatable, shifts, cultures
The relationship between language and culture is very close since language is part of the culture itself. Language and culture are even inseparable. Furthermore language is culture and culture is language. One cannot be understood unless the other is understood. When people communicate verbally and non-verbally their culture is embodied in their language (Kramsch, 1998: 3). The closeness of the relationship between language and culture is sometimes likened to the two sides of a single coin.

Translating is a process of transferring not only the meanings of Source Language (SL) into Target Language (TL) but also the cultural meanings contained in the text being translated. If only the linguistic meanings of the Source Text (ST) which are transferred into the Target Text (TT) while the cultural meanings are ignored, the translation will only be acceptable linguistically but will be unacceptable culturally. Translating, for example a short English text: Julia mengawini (married) Tom, suaminya (her husband) sepuluh tahun yang lalu (ten years ago) is linguistically acceptable, but culturally unacceptable since in Indonesian culture men and women are not in an equal position in terms of marriage. It is a man who acts actively not a woman. Only by changing Julia as the object of the verb married or by changing the active sentence into passive, then the translation will be culturally acceptable in Indonesian culture.

English and Mandailingnese are two distinct languages genealogically, typologically as well as geographically. English belongs to Indo-European family, of Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) word order, spoken mainly in western countries like USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland (Crystal, 2001) by hundreds of millions of speakers who adopt individualistic culture. In contrast, Mandailingnese is an ethnic language of Indonesia that belongs to Austronesian family (Hartmann & Stork, 1972) of VOS (Verb-Object-Subject) word order spoken only by a hundred thousand speakers in a small area of an eastern country who adopt collectivistic culture. Thus it is assumed that anyone who is translating English into Mandailingnese or from Mandailingnese into English must be faced with not only linguistic problems but cultural problems as well.

**The purpose of study**

The purpose of the study was to translate a text spoken by a skilled speaker to accompany part of Mandailingnese wedding ceremony called text of mangupa (TM) into English and to find out translation problems that may arise as linguistically and culturally affected by both distinctness of the SL and the TL and to find appropriate translation techniques to solve the problems so that the translation could be expected readable and acceptable for English readers.
Research Method

1. Data

The data (the text translated) was a written text of mangupa comprising 22 paragraphs and 37 verses. The mangupa ceremony was held in the groom’s house attended by members of dalihan na toluk, the host and the people having the same clan as his kahanggi, the side who gave the host wife, mora, and the side to whom the host gave wife, anak boru. Mangupa is mainly a ceremony of giving advice to a newly married couple. A skilled speaker gives the advice to the couple using things like cooked chicken, boiled eggs, salt, cooked rice etc as the symbols of the advice. For example, the yellow of the egg symbolizes gold. The married couple is advised to collect gold/wealth as much as possible. Thus a mangupa text is actually expressed orally but for the present study a written text (an oral text which had been transcribed into written form) was used because the written text is now available. And the suprasegmental elements contained in the oral form, in the writer’s opinion, are not so relevant to the purpose of the translation.

2. Translation Method

As mentioned previously the text translated was one written in Mandailingnese and then translated into English. Both are very distinct languages. Thus, the type of the translation used belongs to inter-lingual translation. The ideal aim of translation of such type is to achieve a translation which is accurate (without intentionally losing some important information), readable (easy to read and understand) and acceptable (can be accepted by the readers because the translation has conformed to their cultural values). However such an ideal translation is not easy to achieve. A translation whose purpose is to render the meaning of the text being translated although the form of the translation is not similar to the form of the ST is what is claimed by Larson as idiomatic translation (Larson, 1984:16) or communicative translation by Newmark (1988 : 46). The idiomatic or communicative translation method has been done to translate the TM.

3. Translation Procedures

Since translation is commonly related to two aspects, i.e. the linguistic aspect and the cultural aspect, the first thing done was to compare the linguistic characteristics of English and Mandailingnese to see whether the two languages are different in all aspects or are only different in some important aspects. By knowing the differences of the SL and the TL translation problems could be anticipated. Second, the two cultures were also compared to see whether a translation of a sentence or an expression is acceptable linguistically but is unacceptable culturally. After the two aspects had been compared, then the ST was analyzed to see the genre of the text because a different text needs a different translation approach to
translate it. Then the translation process passed through seven stops: 1) transfer of meaning of the ST to TT, 2) writing the first draft, 3) revising the first draft and then writing the second draft, 4) evaluating the second draft, 5) writing the third draft, 6) reevaluating the second draft and 7) writing the final draft. The translation procedures can be seen in the diagram below.
Translation Procedures
Translation evaluation was done by two people. The ST evaluation was done by an expert and a native speaker of Mandailingnese and the TT evaluation was done by an expert and a native speaker of English.

4. The Process of Translating TM and the Problems Encountered
The TM which consists of 22 paragraphs and 37 verses has been translated by the writer himself and the following is the description how the translation was done and what techniques had been used to solve the problems in order to achieve an accurate, readable and acceptable translation. Unfortunately due the limited space, the complete translation can not be included in this paper.

4.1 Problems Caused by Cultural Differences
The translation problems caused by the differences of SL and TL cultures have been distinguished into two, i.e. 1) untranslatable cultural terms and 2) literally translatable but culturally untranslatable. The terms dalihan na tolu, kahanggi, anak boru, mora, harajaon, raja panusunan, uluan, and pantar paradaton are some of the terms used in the text which do not have equivalents in English and thus they are untranslatable. Let us see how they were left untranslated and their meanings must be explained.

Parjolo (first) au (I) marsantabi (apologize) tu (to) barisan (row) ni (of) dalihan na tolu, kahanggi, anak boru, mora songon i (as well as) tu (to) barisan (row) ni (of) harajaon, sumurung lobi (especially) tu (to) raja panusunan na (who) juguk (sit) di (on) uluan ni (of) pantar paradaton on (this).
Translation:
First of all I would like to apologize to dalihan na tolu, kahanggi, anak boru, mora as well as harajaon particularly to raja panusunan who are all now sitting on the uluan of this pantar paradaton.

These cultural terms are untranslatable since equivalents of those words are not found in English. The term kahanggi refers to a group of people originating from the same ancestor. Literally kahanggi means ‘brothers’. Anak boru refers to one or a group of people who has got a wife from the kahanggi and mora refers to one or a group of people from whom kahanggi has got a wife (wives).

The three sides form a social relation called dalihan na tolu. Dalihan na tolu is a metaphor which literally means ‘fireplace made of three stones that supports a cooking pot’.
*Raja panusunan*, means the first person (king) who established the village, *uluan* is part of the floor away from the entrance door of the traditional house which is regarded as a respected place, and *pantar paradaton* is a wide floor of the traditional house on which the event is held. Salleh (2006) when translating *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a Malay classic text left some cultural terms untranslated like *keris, raja, makan sirih*. According to him they can be translated literally into *dagger*, *king*, and *eating betel* respectively but the cultural meanings contained in the words can not be translated. Teylanyo (2007: 30) also suggests that such terms should not be translated.

Some terms could be easily translated because the equivalents of the words are available in the TL but only the literal meaning that could be transferred while the cultural meanings could not be transferred. The word *amang, inang* and *morsamtabli* correspond to *father, mother* and to *apologize* in English. However *amang* and *inang* here do not refer to one’s father and one’s mother but to one’s son and daughter. English speakers do not call their son and daughter father and mother but in Mandailingnese kinship system one’s son is equal to his/her father and one’s daughter is equal to his/her mother. Thus one may call his/her grandfather (elder) brother and his/her grandmother (elder) sister (Nasution, 2005). Let us see how the two words are used in the two verses below.

*Dijuar horambir poso*
*Mangihut saludang na tobang*
*Tinggalkon ma amang adat na poso*
*Madung sandang adat matobang*

A young coconut falls down
An old stem is brought down
*Amang!* Now leave a youth’s customs
On your shoulder now you are carrying a married man’s customs

*Tal duskom ma giring-giring*
*Laho mamasukkon golang-golang*
*Tinggalkon ma inang adat ma bujing*
*Madung jujung adat matobang*
Take off your jingling bracelets
When putting on your gold bracelets

*Inang*! leave now the youth’s habits
On your head are now a married woman’s habits

The word *marsantabi* is equal to *apologize* but it is placed in the beginning of the speech before mistakes or errors in the speech are made. Again this is very culture-bound. In a Mandailingnese formal speech it is customary to apologize before saying something. This is contrary to English speakers’ habit who apologize for having done something wrong as seen in the first example above.

### 4.2 Problems Caused by Linguistic Differences

Since Mandailingnese and English belong to two unrelated languages, as a translator I expected that there must be many linguistic differences between the two languages and evidently five translation problems were found while translating the ST into the TT.

1) Since the SL and the TL differ in the structure of noun phrase, compound noun and sentence, it causes translation problems. In the SL, the modifier occurs after the head in both noun phrase and compound noun as in *aek na lan* as a noun phrase and *dalihan na tolu* as a compound noun which literally means ‘clear water’ and ‘the three stones’ respectively. In *aek na lan* *aek* ‘water’ is the head while *na lan* ‘clear’ is the modifier (in the SL an adjective is usually preceded by the particle *na* ‘which’). In *dalihan na tolu* again *dalihan* ‘fire place’ is the head while *na tolu* ‘three’ is the modifier. In the SL, typically, the subject occurs after the verb when the verb is intransitive as in *Sayur badan do hot tondi* literally ‘body and soul get older’ or in *martamba denggan paruntungan* literally ‘fortune gets better’ where *badan do hot tondi* and *paruntungan* are subject while *sayur* and *martamba denggan* are verbs. When the verb is transitive, the sentence pattern is verb–object–subject as in *Pamilas aek inang* where *pamilas* ‘boil’ is a transitive verb, *aek* ‘water’ is the object of the verb and *inang* ‘mother’ is the subject. In English the typical pattern of sentence is S–V–O as in *mother boils water*.

2) The subject of sentences, number and conjunctions are sometimes not expressed explicitly in the ST while in the TL they are always shown explicitly. In *sada panginuman sada perbasuan* which literally means ‘one place for a drink and one place for washing hand’ there is no conjunction between the two phrases. Similarly there is no conjunction in *tubuan anak nian tubuan boru* which literally means ‘get sons and get daughters’ but in TT they are
usually shown explicitly as in ‘a glass and a bowl’ and ‘baby-boys and baby-girls be born’ respectively.

In harani rumbuk hita satahi ‘because we are intimate, we are in agreement’ the subject of the first sentence does not appear. When the subject (hita) appears it will become harani hita rumbuk, hita satahi. So in the translation the subject has been added as in since we are intimate we are always in harmony. In muda marjagal bahat mandapot untung which literally means ‘when selling get much profit’ there is no explicit subject but it is understood from the context that the subject must be the addressees, that is ho ‘you’ or hamu ‘you–all’ because the addressees are both the bride and the groom. In the translation the subject had been added as in when selling things you may make much gain.

3). A phrase in the ST may correspond to a clause in the TL and one word category in the ST may shift to a different word category in the ST. Di hanaek ni mata ni ari ‘at sunrise’ is a phrase but it needs to be translated into a clause in order to make it longer so that it matches the next sentence because it is part of a verse as in while the sun is beginning to rise, it is the time for luck and nobility to rise. The word lungun-lungunan ‘lonely’ is an adjective but it shifts to a noun (loneliness) in order to help make a good rhyme as in

Yearning for his experiences in the past
May his loneliness be released.

4). English has tense while Mandailingnese does not. This may cause translation problems especially when the translator does not pay much attention to non-linguistic context in which an utterance of the ST is used.

Let us see the example below.

Ari (day) on (this) ari (day) na (particle) denggan (good) ari (day) na (particle) uli (beautiful), ari (day) na (particle) tupa (right) ari (day) na (particle) niligi (see) ni (of) bayo datu (headman) di (at) hanaek (rise) ni (of) mata ni ari (sun), diupa (advised) tondi (spirit) badan (body) muyu (your) anso (so that) manaek (climb) tua (luch) hamamora (nobility)

In this sentence there is no a word that is referring so the time explicitly in which the action is done except the adverbial phrase ari on ‘this day’. But since the mangupa ceremony is habitually performed while the sun is rising (at about 9 to 11 am) so in the translation the progressive tense, simple present tense and future tense were used as seen below.

It is a good day, a lovely day, the right day, the day which has been examined by the bayo datu (headman), When the sun is rising, your spirit and body diupa (being advised) so that your luck and nobility will rise.
5). *Mangupa* text is a classic text so that many old words or even archaic words are still used. Younger people normally do not understand most of the archaic words while older people are no longer available and there is no a dictionary of archaic words. Since their meanings are unknown many archaic words were left untranslated especially in the translation of the verses. However, when translating verses the translator is allowed to replace the archaic words with new words as long as the basic meaning of the verse can be conveyed. (Newmark, 1988, Salleh, 2006. Chan, 2003). So some archaic words had been replaced and some had been left untranslated. Some of the archaic words used in the MT are *omas si gumorsing, rambe-rambe lai-lai, sangap, si maradang tua, juhut gana-ganaan, tulan rincan, longa tinungtung, sinta-sinta, andalado, pulik*.

### 4.3 Translating Poetry

Known as *pantun* in Indonesian literature, this traditional poetric form consists of two couplets; the first suggests the second by sound or other similarity (Echols and Shadily, 1989: 409). *Pantun* is very popular in Indonesia because of the beauty of its language. It is a means of expressing feelings through a special form of language which has musical rhythm (Chan, 2003: 1). Poetry does not only have semantic function and aesthetic form but is also used as a means of arousing feeling and produce emotional effect (Connolly, 1998: 176).

Translating a poetic text is more difficult than translating a prose text because the translator’s task is not only to convey the meaning but also to achieve rhyming form. And although much poetic nuance can not be transferred, and the forms of the poem can be restructured, the translated poem may be better than the original (Dastjerdi, 2004).

The following is the account of translating the 37 poems in the TM. A number of techniques were applied to translate the poems. Some poems could be translated literally without difficulties but in translating the other poems certain techniques of translation were applied. The adverbial phrase *di hanaek ni mata ni arī*, was translated into *when the sun is beginning to rise* which is a clause. The reasons are it sounds better than *at sun rise* and also to make it match in length with the next line (*It is the time for luck and nobility to rise*). So transposition technique had been applied. In *harani rumbuk, hita satahi* there is no subject in the first clause. If there is a subject it would be *harani hita rumbuk, hita satahi*. In the translation the subject had been added (*since we are intimate, we are always in harmony*) because a sentence without a subject is not common in English. Thus the technique of addition had been applied. The imperative sentence *ulang sirang* literally can be translated into *Don’t get divorced* but it was translated generically into *Avoid argument* so that a good rhyme could be achieved with the previous sentence which sounds *Don’t hesitate to make agreement*. So the technique of generalization had been
adopted. When *tumbuk dapot na ni roha* in the last line is translated literally it will become *so that what is in heart can be achieved* but the literal translation was not done; if it was done so, the translation will not match in rhyme with the second line (*May your destiny become better*). So using alteration technique it was translated into *to achieve your aim and desire*. By doing so, meaning was not distorted and a good rhyme could be achieved.

When these two lines:

*Halaklahi si suan bulu*

*Dadaboru si suan pandan*

are translated literally, they will become

*A boy is a bamboo-grower*

*A girl is a pandanus-grower*

Without indication of tense.

But in the translation the two lines were translated to:

*A boy will be a bamboo-grower*

*A girl will be a pandanus-grower*

adding *will be* to make them future tense. It was done in order to make the tense of the two lines explicit because the previous lines indicate a hope in the future: *when the bride and groom have descendants*. Thus technique of explication had been used.

*Nipasae tanding duru* is a passive sentence which means ‘the edge of the cultivation is cleared’. The line was changed into imperative and simultaneously edge was changed to *shrub* so that it became *clear up the shrub from the cultivation*. The second line *anso santak nida tu ipar* which literally means ‘so that the distance can be seen’ had been translated into *so that the view is clear*. Thus at the same time the technique of transposition, alteration and modulation had been applied in order to achieve good rhyme.

When *gogo hamu sumbayang* is translated literally it becomes *diligently you pray* but it was translated into *may you perform the daily five prayers* in order to achieve good rhyme with the following lines (*may you become a hajj fulfilling one of the Moslem’s pillars*) although *a hajj* is actually not the equivalent of *rukun na lima* in the previous line. *Rukun na lima* is equal to the fifth pillar (of Moslem). But it was not done so because *the fifth pillar* is too generic and the English readers may not be familiar with the term. Thus by applying technique of concretization (Moentaha, 2006 : 62) it was then translated into *become a hajj*, the term which is more specific and popular even for non–Moslem readers.
When *bariba tor bariba rura* of the first line is translated literally it becomes *across the mountain, across the river* but it had been translated into *the rivers flow through the valley* changing the whole sentence to a totally new sentence in order to achieve a good rhyme with the next line (*they gather at the estuary*). The technique of changing the whole form, (transcreation) according to Chan (2003: 15) may be used in translating verses in order to achieve good rhyme as long as the important message/meaning of the verse is not distorted.

**Conclusions**

It is now evident that in translating a culture text a translator will not only be faced with linguistic problems but also cultural problems as what the translator experienced when translating the cultural text from Mandailing. The problems range from simple linguistic and cultural problems to complicated ones such as adding a new element to the TT and replacing the whole form with a new form to make the translation sound better and more readable.

Five linguistic problems were encountered when translating the prose text, that is 1) the problem of translating noun phrases, compound nouns and sentences, 2) the problems of translating subjects of sentences, number and conjunctions, 3) the problem of translating phrases and words (shifts may occur), 4) the problem of translating a linguistic form without tense to a linguistic form with tense, and 5) the problem of understanding the meaning of archaic words in a situation where there were no dictionaries and also no informants who know the meanings of the words.

In translating the verses a number of translation techniques have been applied. The techniques applied were addition, generalization, alteration, explication, transposition, modulation, concretization, and transcreation. The various techniques were used because of the nature of the text being translated, that is, a poetic text.
References