THE PROBLEM OF “CULTURAL UNTRANSLATABILITy” FOUND IN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF JOKOWI’S INSTAGRAM POSTS

Bety Mawarni
School of Global, Urban and Social Studies
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia
betymawarni@gmail.com

Bagus Dwi Pambudi
English Department, Graduate Program
Universitas Negeri Semarang
Semarang, Indonesia
bagus.edu@gmail.com

Betari Irma Ghasani
English Department, Graduate Program
Universitas Negeri Semarang
Semarang, Indonesia
betari.ghasani@gmail.com

Abstract
The massive feasibility of social media has been utilised by numerous organisations and public figures, particularly world leaders, as an interactive way to spread information and to engage people from various backgrounds. In response to the language challenges in the global community environment, social media sites are adopting automatic machine translation to stretch the vastness of information reception. This mini research aims to analyse the problems of cultural untranslatability found in the machine-generated translation of the Instagram posts shared by the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo. The first part of this paper explores the major factors of cultural untranslatability resulted from machine-generated translation in 17 Jokowi’s Instagram posts during May 2017. Deploying Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimension, the second part of this paper analyses how these factors affect the cross-cultural communication in the framework of global environment. The result of this mini research present cultural translatability problems generated from machine translation and how it affects cross-cultural communication in social media. It is expected that the results of this mini research contribute in the development of machine translation as a device to boost cross-cultural communication in social media.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, cultural dimension, cultural untranslatability, machine translation, Instagram

Introduction
In the last two decades, the development of social media has dramatically escalated following the globalisation era. In 2015, 93.4 million of Indonesian people were internet users, comprising 47.9% of Indonesian population. In a wider global society, social media users have reached more than 2.078 billion users worldwide (We Are Social, 2015). The role of social media is gaining an increasing significance in the society as it serves not only as a means of communication but also is utilised in growing business and engaging people for the sake of political interest.

Following Facebook’s acquisition of Instagram in 2012, this social media application has been the most accessed social media in recent years. Currently, there are over 600 million “instagrammers” with over 300 million users
logging on everyday (Social Media Today, 2017). The number keeps growing making it a strategic platform for information dissemination, business promotion, and people engagement. Thus, it makes all sense that this platform captures the attention of world leaders, including the Indonesian president Joko Widodo to engage the society from various background all over the world using Instagram. Through this platform, he shares his activities in relation to his roles as leader in respect to promote his countries respectively.

As of June 2017, Indonesia’s 7th president, Joko Widodo (renowned as Jokowi), ranked 4th as the most attractive world leaders on Instagram and ranked 5th as the most followed world leader with 3.7 million followers and still counting (Jakarta Post, 2017). The account has shared 388 photos and videos capturing the president’s activities including national cultural events, state’s official events, and international relations, followed by captions describing the details of the activities and messages to persuasively promote the positive aspects of the country.

The cross-cultural communication prompts the development of machine translation in social media as a means to bridge the language difference and thus boost communications across cultures. In order for information to better penetrate to the wider society, it needs to “speak” in the language they are using. Instagram offered the translation tool on its application in July 2016 (Instagram, 2016). However, as cultures vary, the absence of functional meaning from one culture in another is unavoidable. This absence of functional meaning in the practice of translation is called cultural untranslatability. It is a problem arises when the source language text is completely absent in the culture of which TL is a part (Catford, 1965).

In response to that problem, this paper aims to analyse the cultural untranslatability found in Jokowi’s Instagram posts by answering the questions of what major factors of cultural translatability generated from machine translation and how the factors affect cross-cultural communication.

Methodology
Deploying the descriptive qualitative approach, this paper presents the case study related to the topic. The data was acquired through a comprehensive reading and recording both the original and English (Australia) translated posts. To narrow the scope, this research involved 20 photos and videos shared during April 2017 of which only 17 posts are able to be translated using the Instagram’s translation tool. The data was then analysed using Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimension focusing on how cultural difference affects the untranslatability and communication across cultures.

Finding and Discussion
Jokowi’s Instagram posts mostly describe his activities as a president both in national and international level. In the national level, the posts broadcasted the presidents attending cultural events, visiting the community, or attending the national ceremonial events. This causes may of the words used in the captions culturally marked for they are loaded with cultural specific contents, later referred as cultural elements defining words or combination of words denoting subjects and characteristics of the way of life, the culture, the social and historical development of one nation and alien to another (Sider Florin, 1993 p.123; Newmark, 1998; Dong 2010).

As it is alien to another culture, the cultural elements in the Instagram posts might cause the text fails to achieve the equivalent functional relevance in the target culture. This problem can be caused by several factors: 1) cultural aspects of the languages, 2) cultural gap between related cultures, 3) cultural connotation, 4) divergence between related culture, 5) contact exchange between source language and target language, and 6) meaning expression across languages. Cultural elements will work on the comprehension of both referential meaning and pragmatic meaning (Ke, 1991). This paper focussed only on pragmatic meaning only. For pragmatic meaning, Ke gives the following conditions: i) the preferred object per se is not familiar with the culture of the target language, the pragmatic meaning carried by it is then unintelligible to the target readers, ii) the original word and translated word have the same referential meaning but one has pragmatic and the other not; iii) the original word and translated
word have the same referential meaning but different pragmatic meaning.

Applying Ke’s condition the following excerpt from Jokowi’s Instagram is analysed foregrounding the factors of cultural untranslatability affecting them.


Target Text (TT): Pancasila that our body and soul. I in the bloodstream and our heartbeat, adhesive and wholeness of the nation.

In the above excerpt, the referred object (Pancasila) is not familiar with the culture of the target language (Ke’s condition 1). Pancasila, in this case, is very culture specific as it is an ideology emerged along with the history of the country’s journey to independence. As the target culture might experience the similar history, the sense of going through storm and stress might fail to act in the target culture society. This makes it difficult for the target readers to comprehend why it is in “our body and soul” and “in the bloodstream and our heartbeat”. The phrase “in the bloodstream and our heartbeat” also fails to evoke the equivalent expressive meaning as the original words and the translated words have the same referential meaning, but one has pragmatic meaning and the other not (Ke’s condition 2). In this case, the words referencing parts of the body in both languages. However, in the source culture, the words have pragmatic meaning of being inherited in the society and embodied in the society’s every, which is not in the same effect in the target culture causing the meaning untranslatable due to cultural elements. The similar cases occurred, although infrequent, in other captions mentioning cultural words such as silaturahmi which has the cultural values embedded of bringing good intention along in a visit or meeting instead of merely a word describing a “meeting” of both parties, and so forth.

The words or phrases failed in making effect or transferring the expressive meaning in the target culture due to the cultural gap. Interestingly, the cultural gap is reflected thorough the use of language and thus makes it possible to analysed from the perspective of translation practice. In analysing how this cultural gap can affect the untranslatability, this research deploys Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimension. Hofstede (2000) introduced the concept of cultural dimension comprising 6 dimensions of national culture presenting the country’s preference over another that distinguish countries. The six dimensions include: 1) power distance index (PDI), 2) individualism versus collectivism (IDV), 3) masculinity versus femininity (MAS), 4) uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), 5) long term orientation versus short term normative orientation (LTO), and 6) indulgence versus restraint (IND).

Focusing on the dimensions of individualism versus collectivism, this research analysed how a text is culturally untranslatable and unable to act in the target readers the same way they do in the source community.

Figure 1. The comparison of individualism index between Indonesia and English speaking countries

This dimension foregrounds the fundamental issue of the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members (Hofstede, 2000). The higher score, the more individualist a culture is. Figure 1 shows the index of individualism between Indonesia and three English speaking countries (Australia, UK, and USA). The IDV index in the English speaking countries are far higher than Indonesia, reflecting a more individualist culture.

“Pancasila” and ”silahutarahmi” are some of the examples of cultural words representing Indonesian collective culture. The English translation of the cultural words such as “Pancasila” and ”silahutarahmi” are difficult to translate taking into account the national culture of the target community which is highly individualist. Translating Pancasila as an
ideology will be way too general not to mention losing the pragmatic. The same goes with the word “silaturahmi” which implies the sense of relatedness, something that is more intimate than just a meeting, with the intention of building or maintaining good relationship with the person being visited. The word is commonly used even in the daily visiting activities.

One of the characteristics of highly individualist culture is reflected through the language with the frequent use of the word “I” instead of “we”. Hofstede (2000) stated that a culture with low IDV is also reflected in the language in which the word “I” is not pronounced.

Conclusions

Language as a vehicle to transfer the cultural expression of each discourse community. Brown (2004) describes culture and language as part of each other, both intricately interwoven making it impossible to separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. Therefore, it is important to take into account the cultural background of both source text and target text for producing translation which can effectively function in the target community.

Cultural untranslatability occurs in machine-generated translation due to its inability to recognise the characteristics of culture. Meanwhile, the cultural elements play significant role in determining the extent to which a translation is able to effectively communicate the entire message and pragmatic force of the source text in the target community. The factor of cultural elements can be investigated using the concept introduced and developed by Hofstede. By knowing the degree to which an aspect of a culture differs with another, the translation is expected to able to function as the language of culture in the target community and thus will boost the cross cultural communication in the global level.

References


