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The Role of Translation in Global Diplomacy and International Relations

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Abstract

Translation is a fundamental pillar of global diplomacy and international relations, facilitating communication, resolving conflicts, and promoting mutual understanding across linguistic and cultural divides. This article examines the evolution of translation in diplomacy, from historical treaties to modern institutional practices, highlighting the translator's multifaceted role as a linguistic expert, cultural mediator, and ethical gatekeeper. Challenges such as linguistic complexity, cultural nuances, and ethical dilemmas are explored, alongside the impact of AI-assisted translation in enhancing efficiency while addressing its limitations. The study underscores the indispensability of skilled human translators in maintaining neutrality and fostering global cooperation, advocating for a balanced integration of human expertise and technological advancements.

Keywords

translation, diplomacy, cultural sensitivity, AI-assisted translation, global cooperation

Introduction

Translation has long served as a cornerstone of international diplomacy and global relations, enabling effective communication and fostering understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In an era where the complexity of global challenges necessitates nuanced and cooperative solutions, the role of translation has evolved to become not only a linguistic tool but also a strategic instrument in fostering peace, collaboration, and mutual respect among nations. As highlighted by Asadova (2024), the power of translation lies in its ability to bridge gaps that language alone cannot overcome, making it indispensable in diplomatic contexts.

Historically, translation has shaped the trajectory of diplomacy by ensuring the accessibility and clarity of treaties, agreements, and negotiations. The Rosetta Stone, a multilingual decree from ancient Egypt, and the Treaty of Kadesh, a peace accord between the Egyptians and Hittites, underscore the timeless role of translators as mediators between diverse cultures (Osborne & Rubiés, 2016). These early instances laid the foundation for modern practices, where translation plays an integral role in global institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union. Yan (2024) emphasizes that without translation, international forums would falter under the weight of linguistic divides, rendering collaboration an insurmountable challenge.



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However, the role of translation extends beyond linguistic fidelity. Zouba'a (2024) argues that translators in diplomatic contexts often function as cultural intermediaries, tasked with interpreting subtle nuances, idiomatic expressions, and context-dependent meanings that shape international discourse. This role requires not only linguistic expertise but also a profound understanding of the socio-political and cultural underpinnings of the languages involved. Failure to account for such nuances can lead to miscommunication, eroded trust, and, in some cases, diplomatic crises (Zhang, 2014).

The advent of digital technology and artificial intelligence has further transformed the landscape of diplomatic translation. While tools such as machine translation have revolutionized speed and accessibility, they often lack the sensitivity and interpretive depth required for high-stakes negotiations (Mirzayev, 2024). Barman (2024) highlights the growing reliance on digital platforms in global diplomacy but cautions against overdependence on technology at the expense of human expertise. This tension between efficiency and accuracy underscores the need for a balanced approach, integrating technological advancements with the irreplaceable skills of human translators.

In this article, we explore the multifaceted role of translation in diplomacy, examining its historical evolution, contemporary applications, and future trajectories. By analyzing the interplay between linguistic precision, cultural interpretation, and technological innovation, we aim to illuminate how translation continues to shape the dynamics of international relations. Furthermore, this study underscores the ethical and practical challenges that accompany diplomatic translation, advocating for strategies that uphold neutrality, foster cultural sensitivity, and enhance global collaboration.

Historical Evolution of Translation in Diplomacy

The significance of translation in diplomacy can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where multilingual empires relied on translators to foster political and economic relations. These early translators were more than linguistic intermediaries; they were cultural mediators whose work shaped the trajectory of historical alliances and agreements. As Osborne and Rubiés (2016) observe, translation played a pivotal role in the diplomatic exchanges of the early modern world, facilitating interactions between vastly different societies and laying the groundwork for contemporary diplomatic practices.

One of the earliest examples of translation in diplomacy is the Rosetta Stone, a decree issued in ancient Egypt, written in Hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Greek scripts. This multilingual document served as a practical tool to ensure comprehensibility across linguistic groups within the



empire, illustrating the role of translation in maintaining governance and unity in diverse societies. Similarly, the Treaty of Kadesh, a peace accord between the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II and the Hittite King Hattusili III, highlights the indispensable function of translators in resolving conflicts and formalizing agreements across linguistic barriers (Osborne & Rubiés, 2016).

During the medieval and early modern periods, translation became increasingly intertwined with the expansion of trade and exploration. The rise of European colonial powers necessitated the use of interpreters to negotiate trade agreements and establish political ties with indigenous populations. However, as noted by Zouba'a (2024), these translators often operated in contexts rife with cultural misunderstandings and unequal power dynamics. The outcomes of these translations shaped not only political treaties but also the cultural exchanges that emerged during this era.

In the 20th century, translation underwent significant institutionalization with the establishment of global organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). These entities recognized the need for standardized translation practices to ensure effective communication among member states. Asadova (2024) highlights the importance of multilingualism in the UN, where official translation services enable the equitable participation of nations in global discourse. By adopting professional standards emphasizing accuracy, neutrality, and cultural sensitivity, these institutions elevated translation to a critical pillar of international diplomacy.

The evolution of translation in diplomacy has also been shaped by advancements in professional training and technology. The development of simultaneous interpretation, pioneered during the Nuremberg Trials, revolutionized the field by enabling real-time communication among speakers of different languages (Yan, 2024). This innovation marked a turning point, showcasing the potential of translation to facilitate dialogue in high-stakes scenarios. Today, translators in diplomacy are not only linguistic experts but also adept cultural interpreters, ensuring that messages are contextually appropriate and resonate across diverse audiences.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Diplomatic language is often characterized by ambiguity and nuance, requiring translators to navigate complex socio-political contexts while maintaining fidelity to the source text. Misinterpretation or bias, whether intentional or unintentional, can have far-reaching consequences, as illustrated by Zhang (2014), who explores the role of implicitness in diplomatic discourse. These challenges underscore the critical importance of human expertise in ensuring the success of diplomatic translation.



The historical evolution of translation in diplomacy demonstrates its enduring relevance as a bridge between nations. From ancient peace treaties to modern international organizations, translation has facilitated communication, resolved conflicts, and promoted mutual understanding across linguistic divides. As global diplomacy continues to evolve, the lessons of history serve as a reminder of the indispensable role of skilled translators in fostering cooperation and peace.

Translators as Mediators in Global Diplomacy

Translators in diplomacy fulfill a multifaceted role that extends beyond the mere conversion of words from one language to another. They are mediators who bridge cultural and linguistic divides, ensuring that diplomatic communication is not only linguistically accurate but also contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive. In the intricate arena of international relations, where nuances of language can influence the outcome of negotiations, translators serve as indispensable facilitators of dialogue and understanding.

The Linguistic and Cultural Mediator

Translators in diplomacy must navigate a delicate balance between linguistic precision and cultural interpretation. As noted by Zouba'a (2024), diplomatic language often carries implicit meanings, idiomatic expressions, and cultural connotations that cannot be directly translated. For instance, idioms or culturally specific terms may require adaptation to preserve their intended impact. Misinterpretation of these nuances can lead to misunderstandings, diplomatic tensions, or even conflicts. This positions translators as cultural intermediaries who not only convey the literal meaning but also interpret the speaker's intent within the appropriate cultural framework.

Yan (2024) highlights the critical role of translators in ensuring that international agreements and treaties are linguistically consistent and free from ambiguities. A mistranslation in a high-stakes negotiation could result in unintended political or economic consequences, making the translator's expertise a cornerstone of successful diplomacy. For example, during the drafting of the Paris Agreement on climate change, precise translation was essential to align the commitments of diverse nations with varying legal and cultural frameworks.

Neutrality and Trust

One of the key ethical principles of diplomatic translation is neutrality. Translators are expected to act as impartial conduits of information, avoiding any alteration or bias that might influence the message's intent. As Asadova (2024) emphasizes, neutrality is vital in conflict resolution scenarios, where translators mediate sensitive discussions between opposing parties. Their ability to remain unbiased fosters trust, enabling stakeholders to engage in open and constructive dialogue.



The role of translators in mediating peace negotiations and crisis talks cannot be overstated. For instance, Zhang (2014) explores how translators' interpretations during ceasefire negotiations have a direct impact on the success or failure of the process. A single mistranslated term can escalate tensions or derail agreements. Skilled translators ensure that all parties' perspectives are accurately represented, building mutual trust and paving the way for resolution.

Ethical and Political Challenges

Despite their vital role, translators often face ethical and political challenges in their work. Zouba'a (2024) identifies the risk of unintentional bias or manipulation, where a translator's choice of words might inadvertently favor one party over another. Additionally, the confidential nature of diplomatic translation demands the highest level of discretion. Leaks or misinterpretations of sensitive documents can have significant geopolitical ramifications, underscoring the need for professional integrity and ethical standards.

The Translator as a Cultural Ambassador

Beyond facilitating communication, translators contribute to cultural diplomacy by promoting mutual understanding and respect. As Xhemali (2022) points out, translation allows nations to share their cultural heritage, literature, and values, fostering goodwill and strengthening relationships. For example, translating historical speeches or literary works can serve as a gesture of diplomacy, symbolizing respect and appreciation for another culture.

Carbó Catalan (2023) highlights the role of literary translation in bridging intellectual and cultural divides, creating opportunities for collaboration and deeper connections between nations. This broader dimension of translation underscores its potential to influence not only political relationships but also societal perceptions and intercultural exchange.

In global diplomacy, translators act as mediators who bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, enabling nations to engage in meaningful dialogue and collaboration. Their role extends beyond language conversion to encompass cultural interpretation, ethical responsibility, and trust-building. As the demands of international relations grow increasingly complex, the translator's ability to navigate these challenges underscores their indispensable role in fostering global understanding and cooperation.

Challenges in Diplomatic Translation

Diplomatic translation is a highly specialized and sensitive field where even minor inaccuracies can have far-reaching consequences. Translators working in this domain face a myriad of



challenges, ranging from linguistic complexities to ethical dilemmas and political pressures. Understanding these challenges is critical to ensuring that translation in diplomacy remains accurate, neutral, and culturally sensitive.

Linguistic Complexity and Nuance

Diplomatic language is inherently complex, characterized by ambiguity, formality, and culturally loaded expressions. Translators must navigate these intricacies to convey the intended meaning without distortion. As noted by Zouba'a (2024), diplomatic texts often include idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and context-dependent phrases that may lack direct equivalents in the target language. For example, the English idiom "kick the can down the road" may confuse non-native speakers if translated literally, as it fails to capture the metaphorical meaning of delaying a decision.

Moreover, the use of euphemisms and vague terms in diplomatic discourse adds another layer of complexity. Zhang (2014) emphasizes that these linguistic features are often deliberately employed to maintain flexibility and avoid offense in negotiations. However, this ambiguity can pose challenges for translators, who must interpret the underlying intent while preserving the original tone and meaning.

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural differences significantly impact how diplomatic messages are interpreted. Translators must be adept at recognizing and addressing cultural nuances to prevent unintended offense or misunderstanding. For instance, honorifics, gestures, and symbolic language vary widely across cultures, and their mishandling can undermine diplomatic efforts. Yan (2024) highlights that culturally insensitive translations can escalate tensions, particularly in high-stakes scenarios such as peace negotiations or international summits.

An illustrative example is the mistranslation of President Jimmy Carter's speech during his visit to Poland in 1977. The interpreter mistakenly rendered Carter's statement, "I left the United States this morning," as "I abandoned the United States forever," leading to significant diplomatic embarrassment. This incident underscores the importance of cultural competence in diplomatic translation.

Ethical Dilemmas

The ethical dimension of diplomatic translation is equally challenging. Translators are expected to maintain strict neutrality, yet they often work under conditions where political interests or personal



biases may influence their choices. As Asadova (2024) points out, even subtle shifts in tone or emphasis can alter the meaning of a message, potentially swaying negotiations or public perceptions.

Additionally, confidentiality is paramount in diplomatic translation. Translators frequently handle classified documents, and any breach of trust can have severe political and legal consequences. Zouba'a (2024) emphasizes the need for rigorous ethical standards and professional integrity to uphold the credibility of the translation process.

Political and Strategic Pressures

Translators in diplomatic settings often work under intense political and strategic pressures. Governments and international organizations may prioritize their own interests, subtly pressuring translators to frame messages in ways that align with specific agendas. Asadova (2024) warns that such pressures can compromise the translator's neutrality and potentially distort the intended meaning of diplomatic communications.

For example, during the Cold War, translation often became a tool of propaganda, with both sides employing interpreters to craft messages that served their ideological objectives. This historical precedent highlights the precarious position of translators, who must balance professional ethics with the demands of their employers.

Technological Limitations

While technology has revolutionized translation in many fields, its application in diplomacy remains fraught with challenges. Machine translation tools, such as Google Translate or DeepL, are ill-equipped to handle the subtleties of diplomatic language, including idioms, cultural nuances, and implicit meanings. Mirzayev (2024) notes that while AI-assisted translation can enhance efficiency, it often falls short in contexts requiring cultural sensitivity and ethical judgment.

The reliance on technology also raises questions about data security. Barman (2024) highlights that using digital tools for sensitive diplomatic communications increases the risk of leaks or cyberattacks, posing significant threats to national security.

Impact of Miscommunication

The consequences of mistranslation in diplomacy can be profound, ranging from minor misunderstandings to severe diplomatic incidents. Zhang (2014) describes how a mistranslated term during ceasefire negotiations could lead to the collapse of peace talks, prolonging conflict



and exacerbating tensions. These high stakes underscore the critical need for skilled human translators who can navigate the complexities of diplomatic communication.

The challenges of diplomatic translation demand a unique blend of linguistic expertise, cultural sensitivity, ethical judgment, and political awareness. Translators in this field must operate under immense pressure, often with little room for error. Addressing these challenges requires ongoing investment in translator training, the development of ethical guidelines, and the integration of advanced technologies with human oversight. By overcoming these obstacles, diplomatic translation can continue to serve as a vital tool in fostering global understanding and cooperation.

The Role of Technology in Diplomatic Translation

The advent of technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and machine translation tools, has revolutionized the field of translation, including its application in diplomacy. These advancements have introduced new opportunities for efficiency and accessibility while also presenting unique challenges. In the context of global diplomacy, technology serves as a double-edged sword—offering innovative solutions while requiring careful integration with human expertise to ensure linguistic and cultural accuracy.

AI-Assisted Translation: Efficiency and Limitations

AI-powered translation tools, such as Google Translate and DeepL, have dramatically improved the speed and scale of translation processes. These tools can process vast amounts of text in real time, making them valuable for preliminary drafts, multilingual document reviews, and logistical communication in international organizations. Mirzayev (2024) highlights that AI-assisted translation has enabled institutions like the United Nations to handle the enormous volume of documents generated during conferences and summits, improving overall operational efficiency.

However, the limitations of AI in diplomatic contexts are significant. Diplomatic language is often characterized by subtlety, ambiguity, and cultural nuance—elements that AI struggles to interpret accurately. For example, idiomatic expressions, such as “walking a fine line,” might be translated literally by AI, leading to misinterpretations that could undermine the intended message. Yan (2024) emphasizes that while AI excels in processing standardized content, it lacks the contextual understanding and ethical judgment required for sensitive diplomatic communication.

Cultural and Ethical Considerations



One of the primary challenges of integrating technology in diplomatic translation is the inability of AI to account for cultural nuances. Zouba'a (2024) argues that cultural sensitivity is essential in diplomacy, where even minor misunderstandings can have significant geopolitical consequences. Human translators play a crucial role in interpreting the cultural subtext of diplomatic language, ensuring that messages are not only accurate but also respectful and contextually appropriate.

Ethical concerns also arise when relying on AI for diplomatic translation. Machine translation tools are prone to biases embedded in their training data, which may inadvertently influence the tone or meaning of translated content. For instance, Mirzayev (2024) notes that some AI systems have been found to reinforce stereotypes or fail to adapt to the formality required in diplomatic settings. Such biases could jeopardize the neutrality expected in diplomatic communications, potentially escalating tensions or damaging relationships.

Security Risks in Digital Translation

The use of technology in diplomatic translation introduces vulnerabilities related to data security. Translating classified or sensitive documents through online platforms poses risks of data breaches, cyberattacks, and unauthorized access. Barman (2024) underscores that diplomatic communications are often prime targets for cyber espionage, making the protection of translated content a critical priority. To address this, some organizations have developed in-house translation systems with enhanced security measures to mitigate risks.

Human-AI Collaboration: A Balanced Approach

While AI cannot fully replace human translators in diplomacy, it can complement their work by streamlining routine tasks and enabling real-time support. For example, simultaneous interpretation systems augmented with AI can assist interpreters during live events, providing prompts and reducing cognitive load. Asadova (2024) suggests that such collaborations allow human translators to focus on more complex and sensitive aspects of diplomatic communication, ensuring both efficiency and accuracy.

Human-AI collaboration also holds potential for bridging linguistic gaps in crisis situations where time is of the essence. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms played a vital role in disseminating multilingual information about public health measures. Barman (2024) highlights that while human oversight remained essential, AI-assisted tools enabled rapid dissemination of critical information to a global audience.

Future Prospects



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The future of technology in diplomatic translation lies in developing systems that integrate linguistic precision with cultural and ethical awareness. Advances in natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning offer promising possibilities, such as context-aware translation models that adapt to the specific requirements of diplomatic language. However, as Mirzayev (2024) emphasizes, these advancements must be guided by ethical frameworks that prioritize transparency, neutrality, and cultural sensitivity.

Technology has transformed the landscape of diplomatic translation, offering unprecedented efficiency and accessibility. However, its limitations in handling cultural nuances, ethical dilemmas, and security concerns underscore the continued importance of human expertise. A balanced approach that leverages the strengths of both human translators and AI tools is essential to meet the complex demands of global diplomacy. By embracing this synergy, the field can advance toward more effective and inclusive communication in international relations.

Translation as a Tool for Cultural Diplomacy

Translation serves as a vital instrument in cultural diplomacy, fostering mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect among nations. Beyond facilitating communication, it plays a significant role in shaping how cultures perceive one another and in building bridges that strengthen diplomatic ties. Through the translation of literature, art, speeches, and historical narratives, nations convey their values, histories, and aspirations, fostering goodwill and collaboration.

Fostering Mutual Understanding

Cultural diplomacy thrives on the exchange of ideas, traditions, and narratives, which is made possible through translation. As Xhemaili (2022) notes, translation allows nations to showcase their cultural heritage, creating avenues for intercultural dialogue and mutual respect. For instance, translating historical speeches or literary works enables one nation to better understand another's cultural and political landscape. This exchange can dispel stereotypes, reduce biases, and pave the way for more inclusive and empathetic global relations.

One prominent example is the global dissemination of literary works such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*. These translations have introduced readers worldwide to the rich cultural tapestries of Latin America and the Arab world, respectively, fostering cross-cultural appreciation and intellectual collaboration (Carbó Catalan, 2023). Such efforts demonstrate the transformative power of translation in fostering global connections.

Translation in Public Diplomacy



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Public diplomacy initiatives often leverage translation to communicate with international audiences and build soft power. Governments and cultural institutions translate key policy documents, speeches, and educational materials to engage diverse audiences and promote their national interests. As Biletska, Lastovskyi, and Semchynskyy (2021) argue, translation in public diplomacy is essential for conveying a nation's values and fostering positive perceptions abroad.

For example, UNESCO's efforts to translate educational and cultural resources into multiple languages have enabled the organization to promote global literacy, sustainability, and cultural preservation. Similarly, translating key speeches by global leaders, such as the Dalai Lama's messages of peace or Greta Thunberg's climate advocacy, amplifies their impact and resonance with diverse audiences worldwide.

Promoting Intercultural Exchange

Translation is also central to facilitating intercultural exchange, allowing nations to share their artistic, scientific, and intellectual achievements. As Carbó Catalan (2023) highlights, literary translation often functions as a form of intellectual cooperation, fostering dialogue between cultures and enriching the global knowledge base. For instance, translating scientific research or philosophical texts ensures that valuable insights are accessible to a wider audience, fostering innovation and collaboration.

Moreover, cultural events such as international film festivals, art exhibitions, and music performances rely heavily on translation to reach global audiences. Subtitles, dubbing, and translated programs allow participants to experience and appreciate artistic expressions from different cultures, enhancing mutual understanding and respect.

Translation as a Symbol of Respect and Cooperation

In diplomatic contexts, translation can serve as a symbolic gesture of respect and cooperation. Translating a nation's significant texts, such as historical documents, national anthems, or literary masterpieces, demonstrates an appreciation of its cultural heritage. As Yan (2024) notes, such acts often strengthen bilateral relations by fostering goodwill and demonstrating a commitment to mutual understanding.

An illustrative example is the translation of Persian poetry by Western scholars, which has long been seen as a gesture of admiration for Iranian culture. Similarly, translating works like the *Tao Te Ching* has introduced global audiences to Chinese philosophical traditions, fostering respect for its ancient wisdom and cultural richness.



Challenges in Cultural Translation

While translation plays a critical role in cultural diplomacy, it is not without challenges. Translators must navigate the intricacies of conveying cultural nuances, metaphors, and idiomatic expressions that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. As Zouba'a (2024) points out, failure to account for these subtleties can result in translations that are either inaccurate or culturally insensitive, undermining their intended purpose.

Additionally, cultural translation often involves ethical dilemmas. Translators must decide whether to adapt or preserve elements of the source material that might be unfamiliar or controversial to the target audience. This balancing act requires a deep understanding of both cultures and a commitment to accuracy and respect.

Translation is a powerful tool in cultural diplomacy, enabling nations to share their heritage, foster mutual understanding, and build lasting relationships. By translating literature, speeches, and cultural expressions, translators help nations bridge divides and collaborate on shared goals. However, the challenges inherent in cultural translation highlight the need for skilled professionals who can navigate linguistic and cultural complexities with sensitivity and expertise. As global interconnectivity continues to grow, the role of translation in cultural diplomacy will remain indispensable, promoting unity in diversity and fostering a more harmonious world.

Conclusion

Translation is not merely a linguistic activity; it is a cornerstone of global diplomacy and international relations. From its historical roots in ancient treaties to its current role in shaping cultural diplomacy and fostering mutual understanding, translation has evolved to become a strategic instrument for bridging linguistic and cultural divides. The translator's role extends beyond linguistic precision, encompassing cultural mediation, ethical integrity, and trust-building, all of which are essential for successful diplomatic engagement.

The challenges faced by translators in this domain, including linguistic complexity, cultural sensitivity, and ethical dilemmas, highlight the need for skilled professionals who can navigate these intricacies with expertise and neutrality. Furthermore, the integration of technology, particularly AI-assisted translation, has introduced both opportunities and challenges. While technological advancements enhance efficiency and accessibility, they cannot fully replicate the cultural nuance, ethical judgment, and interpretive depth provided by human translators.

In the realm of cultural diplomacy, translation serves as a vital tool for fostering intercultural exchange and mutual respect. By making cultural and intellectual achievements



accessible across linguistic boundaries, translation promotes global cooperation and enriches the shared human experience. Acts of cultural translation, whether through literature, speeches, or historical narratives, symbolize respect and collaboration, strengthening relationships between nations.

As the demands of global diplomacy grow increasingly complex, the synergy between human expertise and technological innovation will be critical. A balanced approach that leverages the strengths of both will ensure that translation continues to play an indispensable role in fostering international understanding and cooperation. In this interconnected world, where communication is the foundation of peace and progress, the importance of translation cannot be overstated.

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