The Impact of Translation Errors on International Relations: An Analysis of Historical Diplomatic Events

Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
Volume 6 Issue 2, August 2026: 41-51
ISSN: 2773 692X (Online), 2773 6911 (Print)
Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s)
Published by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
Website: https://www.sab.ac.lk/sljssh
DOI: https://doi.org/10.4038/sljssh.v6i2.147

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Received: 11 April 2026, **Revised:** 30 July 2026, **Accepted:** 17 August 2026.
How to Cite this Article: Karunasena, A.N. (2026). The impact of translation errors on international relations: an analysis of historical diplomatic events. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 6*(2), 41-51.

Abstract

International relations rely on a communication mode that surpasses geographical and cultural barriers. Translation works as a fundamental means in international diplomacy as it bridges the gap between actors in international relations. Translating political communications has been a challenging process for the translator, as varied linguistic, cultural, and ideological norms may lead to distortions in the original intent. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period known for lasting global political tensions due to world wars, colonization and decolonization, and the Cold War, diplomatic communications were understood and interpreted in ways that shaped the entire international relations system. Hence, the study is aimed at examining the role of translation errors in shaping international relations with regard to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The study follows a qualitative content analysis and case study approach to investigate the phenomenon and examines three selected historical events in the said time period, namely, the Potsdam Declaration, which is known as the "Mokusatsu" incident, United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, and the Treaty of Waitangi. The findings of the study elaborate that translation errors result not only from the incompetence of the translator but also from the ambiguity of lexical units, differences in cultural connotations, diverse language conventions in different linguistic communities, and political context. Thus, the study suggests several measures to be taken by future translators to mitigate such translation errors, including paraphrasing, borrowing, explanations, and imitation, as history witnesses severe incidents in global politics due to mistrust and misguidance caused by meaning distortions.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Diplomacy, International Relations, Translation, Translation errors

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the emergence of mankind, language has always been the primary tool for disseminating ideas, perspectives, and views, as it enables effective communication between people and groups. According to the American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager, "A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates." (David & Robins, n.d.). While a language acts as the core medium through which a person communicates in the personal, professional, and cognitive contexts - in formulating thoughts and ideas - it enables humankind to express their perspectives and engage with others in international settings. Language plays a crucial role in facilitating the transmission of vivid perspectives among states, societies, and individuals on diplomacy, the economy and trade, peace, and other global issues such as climate change, power dynamics, and human rights. Thus, it may be argued that language is a key instrument in International Relations (IR) as well, as it facilitates the engagement of involved groups, the negotiation of meanings, and the communication of thoughts and views across geographical borders. According to Jindal Global University, IR is "the study of the relationships between nations, states, and other actors on the global stage" (2025). Further, Jindal Global University (2025) explains that,

It involves analyzing the interactions between sovereign entities, intergovernmental organizations, non-state actors, and multinational corporations. IR is concerned with understanding the dynamics of power, cooperation, and conflict among these actors, and how they shape international institutions, norms, and laws.

Therefore, it can be said that a language provides the foundation for the treaties, agreements, and warnings made by countries and global organisations and becomes the mediator in transmitting their core meaning for many decades to come. However, as we live in a highly globalised and competitive world, countries and their leaders, as well as international organisations, are exposed to communication despite cultural and linguistic boundaries. In other words, these parties experience the challenge of being unable to effectively reach a particular segment of the population due to their use of languages that are not common to the speaker/listener. As each language has its exclusive set of characters, vocabulary, and pronunciation, the comprehension of such a language and its contextual meaning becomes challenging to outsiders of such a linguistic community. In order to overcome this issue, translators act as coordinators between two linguistically distant backgrounds.

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Translation can be identified as the process of reorganizing a text written in one language into another language in order to maintain the original intent and to enable cross-language communication. According to Peter Newmark, “it is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message or statement in one language by the same message or statement in another language” (Newmark, 1981). While a translator assists in successful written communication, they bridge the gap between contradictory linguistic settings and link the source text (ST) writer and target text (TT) reader, allowing multilingual communication. As Julian House states, "translation is replacement of a text in the source language (SL) by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent text in the target language (TL)" (House, 1997, p. 31). He suggests that the translator ensures the preservation of contextual meaning, facts, and information presented in the ST, taking into account the tone, targeted population, and intention.

While translators play a crucial role in shaping global affairs by disseminating written intentions to the target audience, it can be said that history records several incidents that emerged as a result of translation errors. Especially the time during the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, the period post-Second World War marks a highly sensitive period of time in history, which laid the foundation for major substantial events that have an impact even to date. During this era, global politics were shaped by ideological rivalry, nuclear tensions, and a rapidly growing diplomatic structure. Notwithstanding the importance of precise communication during such periods, a range of historical incidents reveals how translation errors affect diplomatic affairs and internal stability.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the research problem of how translation errors impacted shaping international relations through an analysis of selected historical events spanning the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. By focusing on this phenomenon, the researcher intends to provide insights into how translation failures contribute to global tensions, misjudgments, and other major repercussions. Despite the importance of the role of translators in global settings, the existing scholarly writings and studies about translators’ contributions in global politics remain insufficient. Most studies focus on the historical, contemporary, and future application of translation in IR, while several other studies examine the strategies utilised by translators in global politics to enable communication between different languages. Thus, the studies examining the historical events that underwent tensions and challenges due to errors in translations remain underexplored. Further, the existing studies lack a theoretical base in investigating the types of translation errors that contributed to the emergence of particular negative influences in the history of IR. While such studies explore the causes, challenges, and repercussions of translators’ failure to deliver a faithful and accessible outcome, studies in which a thorough investigation into the types of translation errors remain inadequate, as they lack a clear translation error classification or pattern identification. This gap urges a comprehensive approach, for which the researcher provides a theoretical foundation and examines the broader impact of historical events, which depict the failed translation attempts, on IR. This study will therefore intend to address the existing gap in the literature and aim to provide sufficient understanding of the role of translators and translation errors in global political affairs. In studying the role of translation errors in shaping IR, the researcher addresses the issue through four dimensions: the role of pragmatic, cultural, linguistic, and text-specific translation errors in shaping global political processes.

Consequently, the findings of the study will be beneficial for identifying the nature of the translation errors made in selected major historical events that occurred during the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, contributing to both translation and IR subject areas. Such findings may assist in understanding the importance of utilising language in a way to mitigate the possible negative outcomes on different levels; pragmatically, culturally, linguistically, and textually, thus encouraging translators and diplomats for an error-free and responsible engagement in global politics. The present study is limited to examining the role of translation errors in shaping IR only during the period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which was highly sensitive in the history of world politics, and does not consider other instances outside the selected time frame. Further, the study does not investigate how misinterpretations, i.e., the errors made by the interpreter in rendering the contextual meaning of a spoken utterance from one language into another. The following section of this paper reviews the previous studies related to this phenomenon. The third section provides a comprehensive analysis of the methodology, while the fourth and fifth sections present results and discussion, and conclusions made, respectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation

Translation can be identified as the primary tool for bridging the gap between linguistically distinct backgrounds, which have their own specific set of grammatical rules, vocabulary, and sentence patterns, to enable effective communication. What is generally understood as translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted (Bassnett, 1994).

As Toury states, “Translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions, i.e., at least two sets of norm-systems on each level” (1978). He has further described two major elements to consider in the process of translation as (1) being a text in a certain language, and hence occupying a position, or filling in a slot, in the appropriate culture, or in a certain section thereof; (2) constituting a representation in that language/culture of another, preexisting text in some other language, belonging to some other culture and occupying a definite position within it (Venuti, 2000 , p. 200).

According to House (1997, p. 31), "Translation is replacement of a text in the source language (SL) by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent text in the target language (TL)". He implies that the translator is responsible for maintaining a good balance between preserving contextual meaning and rendering the essence of the information and facts presented in the ST, and for making the output accessible to the target readership through careful consideration

of elements such as the audience, tone, and purpose. House argues that translation is not merely a reformulation of a text from one language into another, but a process of maintaining the core meaning and communicative intention of a text for a linguistically distant population.

William Frawley (1984) views the process of translation as a bidirectional process and a mutual relationship between the SL and TL cultures. He argues that when a translator renders the intended meaning of a matrix code (ST) into a target code (TT), the process involves continuous comparison of the two codes, evaluating differences, and adjusting the target code to preserve the underlying meaning conveyed in the matrix code. The bilateral consideration-vacillating across codes-allows us to consider the capacities of the codes participating in the transfer, and to evaluate those capacities off of one another (Frawley, 1984).

International Relations (IR)

International Relations is the study of the relationships between state and non-state actors at the global scale. It includes the way a country navigates itself in global diplomacy, trade, security, and global issues such as environmental issues, climate change, etc. Gosh (2009, p. 1) describes IR as "The study of foreign affairs and global issues among states, including the roles of states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations (MNCs)". He further argues that there is a tendency to use the terms International Relations and International Politics interchangeably, even though they refer to distinct ideas.

According to Shiraev et al. (2014, p. 4) "International relations is a field of social science in which scholars discuss their ideas, arguments, and theories". Wright says, "International relations include relations between many entities of uncertain sovereignties and that it is not only the nations which international relations take to relate, varied types of groups, nation-states, governments, peoples, regions, alliances, confederations, international organizations, even industrial organizations, cultural organizations, religious organizations must be dealt with in the study of international relations if the treatment is to be realistic" (Wright, 1955). Therefore, it is evident that IR refers to the way in which a country deals with other actors at the global level in diplomacy, trade, and other sectors. It is the manner in which a country represents itself outside its territorial borders to achieve its national interests. Delivering a more comprehensive perspective about IR, Mathiesen says (1965) "International relations embraces all kinds of relations traversing state boundaries, no matter whether they are of an economic, legal, political, or any other character, whether they be private or official, and all human behavior originating on one side of state boundary and affecting human behavior on the other side of the boundary".

As Gosh states (2009, p. 4), IR "may be ascertained that IR is a vast field encompassing the relationships among states in all their dimensions, including interactions with various other political and non-political groups, along with the study of international history, international law, international society, and international political economy". Therefore, it can be said that IR is a field in which the actors, including states, NGOs, IGOs, and individuals, behave in a certain way to maintain their relationship with each other. It is the study of how a country utilises dominance in terms of military, economy, and politics to establish itself among other states and continue its own identity and legacy in a competitive world.

IR is grounded in communication and diplomacy. Translation acts as a means of facilitating diplomatic dialogue, negotiations and discussions, and cross-cultural communication. It can be said that translation is inevitably a tool that determines the consequences of diplomatic discussions, as it holds the power to influence in such contexts. Thus, the researcher reviews the role of translation and translation errors in IR in its communication and diplomatic ties in the following sections.

Translation errors

Throughout the history of translation studies, many scholars have attempted to present multiple classifications and taxonomies of translation errors. As Saridaki (2023) says, "Translation errors are those that occur in the translated text resulting from a failure to apply translation principles, rules, and techniques as well as from misinterpretation of a source text segment". She further explains a range of translation errors, including incorrect meaning, barbarism, overtranslation, etc. Liao (2010) introduced a classification of error types, including the types, namely rendition, language, and miscellaneous. Rendition errors refer to the failure of the translator in conveying the exact meaning of the source text. Language errors refer to problematic expressions in the target text. Miscellaneous errors refer to omissions (Soltani, Nemati, & Yamini, 2020). Soltani et al. (2020)further state that "Hurtado suggested a model for the translation quality assessment that is based on error analysis. The model is categorised under three headings: translation mistakes, translation minor errors, and translation major errors. Further, the American Translators' Association (n.d.) presents an error categorisation including the types of 1) Addition, 2) Ambiguity, 3) Capitalization, 4) Cohesion, 5) Diacritical marks/Accents, 6) Faithfulness, 7) Faux ami,, 8) Grammar, 9) Illegibility, 10) Indecision, 11) Literalness, 12) Mistranslation, 13) Misunderstanding, 14) Omission, 15) Punctuation, 16) Register, 17) spelling/ character, 18) Style, 19) Syntax, 20) Terminology, 21) Text Type, 22) Unfinished, 23) Usage, 24) Verb Tense, 25) Word form/Part of speech 26) Other Errors.

As cited in Saridaki (2023), Nord defines translation error as a breach of: The function of the text, the consistency of the text, the text-type, or the form of the text, the language conventions, and the specific conventions and conditions that are related to different civilizations and circumstances. Further, Rahmatillah (Rahmatillah, 2016) cites that Suksaeresup and Tipa Thep-Ackrapong divided errors in translation into two categories: miscue and the translator's wrong assumption of the background knowledge.

Translation, Translation Errors, and IR

Translation has always played a crucial role in IR, and translation errors have shaped global diplomatic events both in positive and negative ways. Translation of treaties, agreements, declarations, and other various types of texts facilitates communication between states and other actors in the diplomatic world. Shahmerdanova states that "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)"

(2025). This showcases that translation became a key element in the diplomatic world as it is a primary tool to enable effective communication between states and other actors involved, despite their linguistic and border differences. As cited by Shahmerdanova (2025, p. 4), "Yan (2024) highlights the critical role of translators in ensuring that international agreements and treaties are linguistically consistent and free from ambiguities". Consistency and being free of ambiguity play a crucial role in translating international texts, as they facilitate a smoother and more effective translation process through which the target readership gains a clear and direct idea about what the ST intends to convey.

İbrahimov comments that (2026, p. 63) there are several error types and "imbalance triggers" that have threatened the diplomatic balance in translating UN documents into Azerbaijani, namely modality shift, tone intensification/mitigation, terminology drift, actor introduction/removal, and unwanted domestication or ideological coloring.

Shahmerdanova (2025, pp. 39-40) identified six key challenges in diplomatic translations. They are,

1. Linguistic Complexity and Nuance
2. Cultural Sensitivity
3. Ethical Dilemmas
4. Political and Strategic Pressures
5. Technological Limitations
6. Impact of Miscommunication

As the study focuses on the role of translation in global diplomacy and international relations, the researcher highlights the importance of translation as a tool for cultural diplomacy (pp. 10-12).

1. Fostering Mutual Understanding
2. Translation in Public Diplomacy
3. Promoting Intercultural Exchange
4. Translation as a Symbol of Respect and Cooperation

Temirbayev investigated the impact of translation and interpretation errors on Cold War diplomacy using a qualitative approach, together with semi-structured interviews with professional translators and interpreters, as the researcher believes that "the collected views and experience of specialists and professionals in translation and interpretation provided better understanding of complex diplomatic language mediation" (2025, p. 3). The study showcases the ability of translators to influence global politics, as he says, "… preliminary insights suggest that translation errors often heightened tensions and influenced political decision-making during the Cold War. It also explores that the translator used several strategies in order to minimize the possibility of occurring miscommunication. They are (2025, p. 11),

1. Proactive clarification – verifying ambiguous statements before translation.
2. Cultural adaptation – ensuring messages retain intended meaning.
3. Cross-checking – using multiple translators to validate interpretations.

He further states that (2025, pp. 5-6), translation became a strategic tool during Cold War diplomacy, and "both U.S.A. and Soviet Union used this tool to spread propaganda and influence public opinion, which showed how language could serve both as a bridge and a battleground in international relations".

Moreover, a study by Benhammadi et al. (2019) investigated the impact of the translator's ideology on shaping international political ties with reference to the Palestinian cause. In the study, the researchers identify strategies used by foreign media platforms such as BBC English, New York Times, Jerusalem Post Newspaper, National Geographic Abu Dhabi, Al Jazeera International, and AFP to translate Arabic texts into the English language, namely (p. 50),

1. Deletion
2. Omission
3. Addition and
4. Substitution

The researchers argue that the use of such strategies causes several miscommunication patterns, such as alterations in the meaning, legitimising political narratives, and meaning distortions, which contribute to tensions between countries and long-term diplomatic strains.

While these studies mainly focus on translation strategies and challenges translators face in diplomacy, the existing literature lacks sufficient studies on how translation errors contributed to the emergence of several diplomatic affairs. Also, such studies lack a theoretical base to investigate the said phenomenon. Therefore, the present study intends to address the issue of the impact of translation errors in global politics and minimize the existing literature gap.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study, as it addresses the problem of how translation errors shape IR, is as follows. Christani Nord's classification of translation errors is accompanied by an examination of the types of translation errors made by translators in the selected events, in dealing with their relations with other states and non-state actors. As cited by Saridaki (2023, p. 28), Nord defines translation errors as "a failure to carry out the instructions implied in the translation brief, that is, failure to achieve the communicative purpose of the translation". The classification includes four types of translation errors, and they are as follows.

Table 1: Theoretical Framework

Pragmatic translation errors	**caused by inadequate solutions to pragmatic translation problems such as a lack of receiver orientations**
Cultural translation errors	They result from an inadequate decision about reproduction or adaptation of culture-specific conventions
Linguistics translations errors	Caused by an inadequate translation when the focus is on language structures
Text-specific translation errors	that are related to a text-specific translation problem. In such cases, the translator has to act creatively since the solutions provided in specific translation problems cannot be

	generalized and applied to similar cases

Source: Evanthia Saridaki, 2023

According to Nord, pragmatic translation errors are classified as the most serious translation errors, as she says, "since the recipients tend not to realize that the piece of information they receive is wrong" (Saridak, 2023). Mona Baker (Baker, 1992) defines pragmatics as "[…] the study of meaning not as generated by the linguistic systems but as conveyed and manipulated by participants in a communicative situation". Marinani et al. (2019, p. 77) say that "This includes the speaker's and addressee's background attitudes and beliefs, their understanding of the context in which a sentence is uttered, and their knowledge of the way in which language is used to communicate information". Thus, pragmatic errors can be identified as errors made by a translator due to their inability to capture the background of the ST and therefore deliver a less coherent output to the target readership. Irodaxon et al. (2025, p. 271) say that pragmatics include Speech acts (e.g., requesting, apologizing, promising), Implicature (suggested meaning not directly stated), Deixis (contextual references such as "here," "you," "now"), Presuppositions, Politeness and indirectness, Cultural references, and idioms. Further, they indicate that (2025, p. 271), "Translating these elements poses challenges because they are highly dependent on context, shared assumptions, and cultural norms". In another study, Saridaki mentions that "Pragmatic problems arise from the differences of circumstances between the two texts and they can be identified by comparing a number of textual factors such as the recipient, medium, time, place, motive, source-text function" (Saridaki, 2025). Thus, pragmatic translation errors occur when the translator is incapable of comprehending the context, purpose, and style of the ST.

Saridak cites that "the seriousness of cultural errors depends on the extent to which cultural conventions of the source text are adjusted to the stereotypes of the target-culture" (Saridak, 2023). If the purpose of the translation task is to test language proficiency (as in foreign-language classes), linguistic errors will perhaps carry more weight than cultural errors (Rahmatillah, 2016). Rahmatillah (2016, p. 18) further states that "If the purpose of the translation task is to test cultural proficiency, cultural translation problems could even be ranked higher than pragmatic errors". Cultural translation errors result from the translator's incompetence in the TT culture and their specific set of norms and conventions, as Saridaki (2025) says, "Cultural problems result from differences in norms and conventions that characterize both the verbal and non-verbal behaviour between the two civilizations involved".

Translation problems can also occur due to structural differences in the vocabulary, syntax, and stylistic features between the two texts (Saridaki, 2025, p. 1). Syntax refers to the structure of a sentence. Mariani et al. (2019, p. 47) depict that syntax is "the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language". Further, they argue that (2019, p. 47), "From the other perspective, syntax is defined as the study of arrangements of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences or syntactical constructions". Therefore, the errors that the translator makes in using lexical units, sentence structuring, and using stylistic devices refer to the "linguistic translation errors". As AFLS says (Service, n.d.) "These involve the incorrect use of grammar, punctuation, spelling, or syntax in language translation. It's essentially about the mechanics of the language, and such errors can severely compromise the quality of the translation". It can include the incorrect choice of lexical units, incorrect positioning of Subject (S), Verb (V), and Object (O), false active-passive structure, and other types of structural errors in translation.

The final translation error introduced by Nord, which is text-specific errors, refers to the mistakes that occur due to the lack of familiarity with the subject matter or field-specific jargon (Service, n.d.). In this study, it can be said that the translation errors made by the translator due to her/his lack of proficiency in the field of IR and its concepts have contributed to the occurrence of such errors. Inability to comprehend the text about the field under discussion, false usage of jargon and lexical units, limited knowledge about the related concepts, and ideologies are the main causes for the translator to make text-specific translation errors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach and Research Design

The study follows a qualitative research approach as it intends to examine how translation errors influenced political results in world history through a specific set of incidents. As the study focuses on understanding the nature of linguistic misunderstandings and their repercussions in international politics, no numerical values are taken into account. A qualitative approach, therefore, is appropriate as the study analyzes meaning, context, and interpretation in historical diplomatic communication. The study is designed as a case study analysis of several historical events in order to explore how translation errors shaped world politics. By focusing on several key historical events, the study aims at understanding the patterns that could be identified and, therefore, be able to analyse whether translation has an impact on global affairs or not.

In exploring the role of translation in these three historical events, the study addresses four research questions, which are,

1. How did pragmatic translation errors shape international politics?
2. How did cultural translation errors shape international politics?
3. How did linguistic translation errors shape international politics?
4. How did text-specific translation errors shape international politics?

Data Collection

A textual analysis is used as the method of data collection. The study is based entirely on secondary data sources, as it is aimed at examining three events recorded in the history of world politics. Data are gathered from official websites, academic books, previous journal articles related to the study, and other reliable historical records and information available online. These resources were beneficial in accessing the descriptions of original statements, the translations, and the political reactions that marked the history of diplomacy. The following table indicates the sources from which data are gathered for the textual analysis.

Table 2: Classification of Sources used for Data Collection

Source Type	No. of Sources	No. of Extracts	References
Official websites	05	05	United Nations (1967) New Zealand Human Rights Commission (n.d.) Museum of New Zealand (n.d.) The Encyclopedia of New Zealand (n.d.) National Diet Library (2003)
Online articles and Reference Websites	07	08	Encyclopedia Britannica (2025) Gaijinpot Blog (2014) GK Today (2012) ACT (n.d.) Te AKA Māori Dictionary (n.d.) Denshi Jisho Dictionary (n.d.) Universal Translation Service (2024)
Online Documents	01	01	Claudia Orange (2022)
Journal Articles	02	02	Boris Naimushin (2021) Egamberdiyeva Irodaxon et al. (2025)
Academic Books	01	01	Robert J. C. Butow (1954)

Source: Developed by Researchers, 2026

Sampling Method

For the investigation of how translation errors contributed to the unfolding of several incidents in IR history, the most relevant events that had a relatively severe impact on the world are chosen. Thus, the purposive sampling method is used. The selected incidents have been highly influential in world political events to date and are most appropriate in discussing the role of translation errors in shaping IR. In selecting the historical events to analyze in the study, the following criteria are followed.

1. Time period

The selected events are marked during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period during which a series of intense geopolitical tensions, conflicts, post-war settling, and diplomatic affairs were recorded.

2. Representation of translation errors

The selected events emphasise how written errors resulted in challenges to the political parties in their global affairs, and do not consider misinterpretations that contributed to the challenges in international affairs.

3. Significance

Rather than being viewed as minor communication errors made in history, these incidents have clear political and diplomatic consequences, such as colonization and decolonization, conflicts and war, and have shaped long-term political disputes and rivalries.

Corpus of the Study

Based on the above-mentioned criteria, three historical events are selected to study the role of translation in worldly matters. They are,

1. Potsdam Declaration (The Mokusatsu Incident - 1945)
2. UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967)
3. Treaty of Waitangi (1840)

The selected events can be identified as incidents in world history that were able to influence global political agendas, alliances among major power blocs, and the stability of countries, even at a contemporary level. Thus, an analysis of the nature of the role of the translator that caused the emergence of these events in history is crucial to navigate a country towards successful diplomatic affairs.

Data Analysis

The collected data are analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method in order to examine their patterns and consequences. Each case is carefully analyzed to examine how pragmatic, cultural, lexical, or textual translation errors resulted in shaping global political affairs. This approach allows researchers to explore whether nonequivalence, cultural differences, ambiguity, and strategic measures have caused such translation errors that impacted world politics on a large scale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Potsdam Declaration (The Mokusatsu Incident - 1945)

The Potsdam Declaration was issued on 26th July 1945, in the final stages of World War II, by the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, demanding the unconditional surrender of Japan. The leaders outlined their terms of surrender, which included complete disarmament, occupation of certain areas, and the creation of a “responsible government” (Britannica, 2025). Further, as the National Diet Library says (2003), it warned Japan, which was militarily weakened at that time, that non-compliance with the declaration and failure to make an unconditional surrender would cause “prompt and utter destruction”. In response, Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki used the term “mokusatsu” to describe their decision, leaving Allied powers to interpret Japan’s stance in a crucial way (Butow, 1954). In the Japanese language, the word “mokusatsu” implies diverse meanings according to the context in which it is used. As Coslett says, “The word is a combination of two kanji: the moku- (黙) [..] combined with -satsu 殺,..” (Coslett, 2014). Denshi Jisho website describes the term “mokusatsu” as “ignoring; disregarding; taking no notice of; refusing to comment on; turning a deaf ear to” (Ahlström, Ahlström, & Plummer, n.d.). The website further provides a Japanese kanji breakdown of the term as follows.

Table 3: Kanji breakdown of the term "Mokusatsu"

黙	殺
SILENCE, BECOME SILENT, STOP SPEAKING, LEAVE AS IS	kill, murder, butcher, slice off, split, diminish, reduce, spoil

Source: Denshi Jisho Website

Among the term's multiple meanings, it can suggest "to withhold comment", "to remain silent", or "to treat with silent contempt".

- 黙 (moku) – meaning "silence" or "to remain silent"
- 殺 (satsu) – meaning "to kill" or "to reject" (gktoday, 2012)

However, in the translation of Kantaro's response, the term "mokusatsu" was translated as "refusing or ignoring the declaration" (Britannica, 2025), leaving the allied powers with the assumption of the Japanese authority's deliberate dismissal of the declaration. As Naimushin says, "The American translator(s) rendered into English the intercepted transmission in Japanese, translating mokusatsu as 'ignore entirely" (2021). Rather than implying it as a strategic delay in responding, translators' attempt to render the meaning of the term as an outright rejection caused utter destruction in Japan, as in August 1945, the U.S. military dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing massive destruction to the cities.

Based on the above-mentioned meanings of the term "mokusatsu", the following possible positive/neutral and negative meanings can be rendered.

Table 3: Possible meanings of the term "Mokusatsu"

Positive/Neutral	**Negative**
No comment (for now)	Ignore
Withholding judgement	Treat with silent contempt.
Remain in silence	Deliberately disregard
-	Not worthy of comment
-	Clear rejection

Source: Developed by Researchers, 2026

Therefore, it is evident that the term "mokusatsu" bears semantic ambiguity as it conveys several meanings. The incident showcases the importance of a translator's competence in the careful rendering of a term with multiple possible contextual meanings, and her/his ability to preserve the contextual meaning of a term for which a direct equivalent term is absent. As the translator was unable to comprehend the nuances, tone, style, and context that the ST was conveying due to uncertainty about a correct and direct term in English, the resulting miscommunication falls under Nord's pragmatic translation errors. Failure of the translator to retain the suggested meaning, which Irodaxon et al. (2025, p. 271) identify as Implicature (suggested meaning not directly stated) that falls under pragmatics, led to the delivery of misinformation and an erroneous translation. On the other hand, as the tragic event originates as a result of semantic ambiguity, the mismatch between the intended and the interpreted meanings resulted not solely from the erroneous translation process, but also from a decision-making problem. Rather than framing it as a clear deviation from the ST, it can be said that the multiple plausible interpretations that the translator may choose due to its ambiguity have also contributed to one of the major devastating incidents in history. Thus, the event can be categorized as a pragmatic error that the translator faces due to the challenge of ambiguous political language.

From a political lens, it can be said that the Japanese leadership might utilize such an expression as a strategic move, implying indirectness to take their time for any internal political discussions and decision-making procedures based on the given possible meanings of the term. Moreover, such an expression might have been used to avoid confrontation or as a strategic ambiguity in their diplomatic communication. However, major superpowers at that time interpreted the term literally as a clear rejection of the declaration rather than taking into consideration its possible contextual meaning.

This historical event emphasizes how a single linguistic miscommunication can lay the foundation for wars and conflicts with a massive number of humanitarian consequences. As the Universal Translation Service website states, "Some think that Kantaro Suzuki knew that mokusatsu is an ambiguous word and decided to use it anyway. They believe that the worst incident in the history of Earth could have been avoided if Suzuki had been more apparent in his speech. If he had said that the Cabinet had not arrived at a decision, then the Allied would not have seen his speech as rejecting their terms" (Universal-translation-service, 2024). It showcases the importance of translation, which has the ability to either construct or destroy a nation during critical historical moments.

UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967)

Following the Six-Day War, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 242 to establish a framework for peace in the Middle East. The resolution included several principles, such as the withdrawal of Israeli forces and the acceptance of all states' right to exist within their secure territorial borders. As the resolution was translated into multiple official UN languages, including English and French, it enabled the UN to communicate its intentions in providing a framework for peacemaking. However, a miscommunication led by a mistranslation in the French version of the resolution led to a long-term diplomatic disagreement in world politics.

The disputes were raised based on the discrepancies in the wording between the English and French versions of the resolution. The following table depicts the differences between the two versions.

Table 4: ENG and French versions of the UN Security Council Resolution's expression

ST	TT
Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;	Retrait des forces armées israéliennes des territoires occupés lors du récent conflit
(Nations, 1967, p. 8)	(Nations, 1967, p. 8)

Source: Developed by Researchers, 2026

It can be noticed that the English version of the expression does not include the definite article "the" before the lexical unit "territories". Thus, the absence of the definite article "the" before territories left an ambiguous effect on the extent of the withdrawal. It could allude to a partial withdrawal, not the complete action. On the other hand, the French version used the phrase "retrait des forces armées israéliennes des territoires occupés," which can be interpreted as a withdrawal from the occupied territories, indicating all territories. The French definite article "des", which is in its genitive form, clearly expresses the meaning "from the" in this context. This slight yet structural difference between the two versions created disputes and a mismatch in the interpretations regarding the same legal text. While Israel claimed their decision for a partial withdrawal in accordance with the English version, Arab states argued that the resolution demands a more comprehensive and full withdrawal. Both parties adopted interpretations that aligned with their own political motives, which led to long-lasting disputes and negotiations. The event implies the role of a subtle grammatical translation error, which led to significant diplomatic consequences. The precise choice of vocabulary and accurate sentence structure play a crucial role in the construction of an error-free translation, especially in diplomatic affairs.

The translator's improper usage of articles can be viewed as a linguistic translation error, as per the classification by Nord. Such errors expose the TT to structural inaccuracies, implying the failure to construct a successful translation. As the event elaborates, linguistic errors can lead to misinterpretations of the ST's meaning, as such errors may compromise the mechanics of the language. In this instance, failure to use articles properly in the TL led to structural ambiguities as to whether the text implies a full or partial withdrawal of armed forces. Omission, addition, or substitution of definite articles can cause the misinterpretation of references or expressions, thus leading to miscommunication between the ST writer and the TT reader.

However, in the diplomatic field, the issue in Resolution 242 is often debated as an example of intentional diplomatic ambiguity rather than a mistranslation. History argues that drafters used diplomatic language that enables future negotiations. The flexible wording left the opportunity for the involved parties to meet their agendas due to the choice of wording by the drafters. On the other hand, according to translation, such errors can be included as linguistic errors.

Treaty of Waitangi (1840)

Te Tiriti o Waitangi or the Treaty of Waitangi was made between the British Crown and the Māori people in 1840 (Orange, 2022). The Preamble sets out the purpose of the Treaty: to protect Māori rights and taonga, keep peace and order, and establish government (Commision, n.d.). However, the British version and the Māori version showcase differences in the articles included in the agreement. In the text for Māori, which was translated by a British missionary, Article 1 stated that Māori should not cede their sovereignty to the British monarchy. It alluded to self-government and protection from the invaders, but not a complete loss of sovereignty. On the contrary, the version for the British stated that Māori would "cede absolutely and without reservation all the rights and powers of sovereignty to her Majesty the Queen of England (ACT, n.d.). The following table illustrates this incident well.

Table 5: English and te reo Māori texts of Te Tiriti o Waitangi | The Treaty of Waitangi, and a contemporary translation of the te reo Māori

ST	English Version of Māori text	TT
ki te Kuini o Ingarani ake tonu atu - te Kawanatanga katoa o o ratou wenua (Zealand M. o., n.d.)	give absolutely to the Queen of England for ever the complete **government** over their land (Zealand M. o., n.d.)	cede to Her Majesty the Queen of England absolutely and without reservation all the rights and powers of **Sovereignty** (Zealand M. o., n.d.)

Source: Museum of New Zealand Website

According to the Te AKA Māori Dictionary (Dictionary, n.d.), the term "Kawanatanga" in the English language means "government, dominion, rule, authority, governorship, province". However, in the TT, it alludes to the contextual meaning that the British Crown would hold the sovereignty of Māori. Though the Māori version of the treaty refers to a relatively limited administrative authority gained by Britain, the English text refers to the cession of "sovereignty", which indicates a broader idea comparatively.

The translator's choice of words in the text has caused discrepancies in the text, which later led to unrest between the two states in their political relations. Whether it was a strategic effort led by their own political agendas, the translator has committed an error by choosing a non-equivalent lexical unit, which conveys a contradictory meaning to that of the original. Thus, it is evident that, according to Nord, the translator has made a linguistic translation error. As the translator has made a false arrangement of words, this error can be categorized as a linguistic translation error.

On the other hand, some critics argue that the cause for the disparities between the two texts was a result of the absence of a direct equivalent term in Māori for "sovereignty". In the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Meredith and Higgins say (Meredith & Higgins, n.d.), "There is no exact equivalent in Māori for this word, since traditional Māori society had decentralised forms of leadership, administration and social control that were quite different from the monarchic and bureaucratic systems of government developed in Britain". Therefore, based on such comments, the incident can be categorized as a cultural translation error. As described in the literature review section, this translation error resulted

from the translator's use of vocabulary, as the term did not have an equivalent in the TT culture. The translator's inability to follow the norms and conventions led to a cultural translation error.

Comparative Discussion

When examining the function of translation errors in IR, a range of trends can be identified in the selected three historical events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most important factor that could be identified through each of these events is how communication in high-stakes settings is influenced by linguistic conventions, translation errors, and challenges. These events demonstrate the extent of the political significance of an error-free translation, particularly when dealing with other states and an international audience. Each of these events is backed by ongoing political tension, which was worsened by the errors of the translator.

Next, it can be said that different linguistic elements have different political implications. While in the "mokusatsu" incident, the confusion that the translator experiences due to semantic ambiguity could alter the way in which the intent is understood at a global political level, translation errors that occur due to cultural differences, such as in the Waitangi Treaty, can change the perception of the ST writer and foster mistrust between the state and non-state actors. At the same time, confusions occurred due to structural differences, such as in Resolution 242, can also impact diplomatic affairs between states. By looking at the three selected historical events, the reasons for the translation errors can be summarized as follows.

Table 6: Summary of Findings

Historical Event	Translation Error	Cause for the Error
Potsdam Declaration (The Mokusatsu Incident -1945)	Pragmatic	Semantic ambiguity
UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967)	Linguistic	Structural differences between languages
Treaty of Waitangi (1840)	Linguistic/Cultural	Choice of terms/Lack of awareness of language conventions and norms

Source: Developed by Researchers, 2026

Based on the above-mentioned research findings, the study provides measures that can be taken by translators in the future, in order to mitigate the possibility of such translation errors.

1. Where a translator experiences semantic ambiguity, she/he should avoid resolving the challenge prematurely. In the context of indeterminacy, multiple plausible meanings are available for a particular lexical unit; the preservation of ambiguity and opting for a neutral choice of vocabulary may reduce the risk of pragmatic translation errors. It may reflect the core meaning of the ST with relatively higher coherence, as it does not confuse the target readership due to ambiguous meanings.
2. The translator should have a thorough understanding of the linguistic and syntactic standards of the TL. The sensitivity to the linguistic norms of the target culture helps the translator to produce an accessible output. Adhering to such linguistic standards is crucial, as a seemingly minor error, such as the omission or the addition of a definite article, can alter the whole meaning and convey an unintended meaning to the target readership. Thus, it is the responsibility of the translator to handle linguistic elements, including grammatical and structural norms, precisely.
3. When a translator experiences the absence of a direct lexical equivalent due to cultural differences between the ST and TT, the translator should be able to adapt to and utilize translation strategies such as paraphrasing, borrowing, use of explanations, and careful imitation. Such strategies help the translator to preserve the nuance of the ST while respecting the cultural differences between languages.

Further, the study elaborates that translation is a process which goes beyond being a simple technical task. Its role in a political setting as a means of influencing the decision-making process of a state as well as other non-state actors in IR demonstrates how errors in the translation process can affect the IR system.

CONCLUSION

The study is aimed at providing insights into the role of translation errors in shaping IR and understanding the repercussions that the world experienced due to mistranslations. It mainly focuses on understanding how important the translator is as a mediator who facilitates cross-language communication through an error-free translation that ensures both accessibility and fidelity to the ST.

The three selected historical events in the IR reveal that translation is a potent process that has impacted political realities both in negative and positive ways. Either intentional, unintentional, or context- or culture-bound language choices made by the translators caused meaning shifts and distortions in their translation and hindered the global political procedures. The history records instances in which the choice of word, phrase, or sentence had the ability to influence the TT reader comprehension, highlighting the significant role and responsibility that the translator holds in political contexts.

The key findings of the study showcase that in the history of IR, pragmatic, linguistic, and cultural translation errors had the ability to influence the decision-making system of state and non-state actors. One of the most potent challenges that the translator may experience when rendering the meaning of a political text into another language is the availability of several possible meanings due to ambiguous ST. Further, the findings elaborate that deviation from the linguistic norms of the target culture and incompetence in the language conventions of the TT can challenge the translation process and cause meaning distortions and manipulations. As described in the "mokusatsu" incident, the misunderstandings occurred due to semantic ambiguity and led to one of the greatest destructions in world history. Though the

outcome was relatively less severe in the other two historical events under discussion in the study, such translation errors could also have contributed to more serious results. In the contrary, it is evident that a successful translation in which the translator links two distinct linguistic backgrounds by making their intentions clear, choosing relatively less impactful or neutral vocabulary in the place of ambiguous choice of words, strengthening the proficiency in target culture, and reach better awareness of linguistic and structural standards can lead to both a faithful and an accessible translation, thus making IR, diplomatic affairs and world politics productive and successful. Hence, translation goes beyond a simple language-based task to the extent of a power that influences how global relationships are modeled.

Further, the study also demonstrates the professional aspects of a translator. The above-mentioned examples illustrate that accuracy and fidelity to the ST are not the only driving forces in a translation. Achieving a higher degree of faithfulness while compromising accessibility, thus leading to miscommunication, cannot be considered a professional and ethical translation process. The translator is responsible for understanding the context, scope, purpose, audience, and potential impact of his/her work. Especially, a translator in the political sector is highly exposed to tensions and confusion. Therefore, a translator must be able to adopt a professional and ethical decision-making process, as cultural and contextual awareness is as important as linguistic competence.

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