Translating *Rebu* in Karo Society into English: Procedures and Problems

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to find out the procedures and the problems in translating “*Rebu*” in Karo Society into English as target language.

*Rebu* means social avoidance of speaking directly. It occurs especially between Mami (wife’s mother) and Kela (daughter’s husband), between turangku (husband’s sister’s husband) and turangku (wife’s brother’s wife), between bengkila (husband’s father) and permain (son’s wife). Such relatives may not speak to each others’ faces. They are not supposed to stay in the same house without the attendance of a third person. It is forbidden to sit on the same floor board with one’s wife’s mother or wife’s brother’s wife.

Translating *Rebu* is difficult task for a translator since it is related to daily habits, traditional customs and conventions, and beliefs of the Karonese. *Rebu* has been inherited from one generation to the next generation in Karonese. In reference to that condition, the alternative procedure in translating *rebu* in Karo society focuses on the procedures of translating culture-specific concepts and the cultural equivalent procedure proposed by Newmark.

The findings show that (1) there are two categories of problems in translating *Rebu* in Karo society, namely the *syntactic* and the *cultural* problems.

**Keywords:** translation, *rebu* in Karo society, cultural equivalent
Translation deals with language and communication. In order to deal with global communication, translation becomes a bridge between different languages. Translation is a process of transferring meaning from the source language into the target language. Translation helps the process of understanding about the meaning of text in the source language and gives solutions to the cultural result in the target language. It is not easy to achieve the cultural translation since it needs a process of equivalence in the target language. A translator must use procedures in translating the source language into the target language.

Bassnett-McGuire (1988) showed in determining what to use in English the translator must—

1) accept the untranslatability of the SL phrase in the TL on the linguistic level.
2) accept the lack of a similar cultural convention in the TL.
3) consider the range of TL phrases available, having regard to the presentation of class, status, age, sex of the speaker, his relationship to the listeners and the context of their meeting in SL,
4) consider the significance of the phrase in its particular context – i. e. as a moment of high tension in the dramatic text,
5) replace in the TL the invariant core of the SL phrase in its two referential systems (the particular system of the text and the system of the culture out of which the text has sprung).

Hornby (1988) found that concept of culture as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception is fundamental in our approach to translation. If language is an integral part of culture, the translator needs not only proficiency in two languages, but he must also be at home in two cultures.

I have translated into English a chapter of the book entitled “Rebu Pada Masyarakat Karo” in Percikan Budaya Karo written by Henry Guntur Tarigan (1976). Yunus (1995) has also done research on the same text which focused on Makna Pemakaian Rebu Dalam Kehidupan Kekerabatan Orang Batak Karo. I also have interviewed the tokoh adat in Karo society who practice rebu and know it well. Rebu is a Karonese term which describes taboos in their social communication.

The Karo are one of the so-called Batak, a collective name for several linguistically and culturally related peoples – the Toba, Karo, Simalungen, Pakpak, Angkola and Mandailing – of North Sumatra (Singarimbun 1975).

There are two areas of Karo; they are the Karo highlands and the Karo lowlands. The Karo lowlands lie at an altitude of approximately 20 to 700 meters and the highland villages are at an altitude of 700 to 1,700 meters. The seven highest peaks in the Karo highlands range from 1,815 to 2,417 meters. The two of these, Sibayak (2,070 m) and Sinabun (2,417 m) are active volcanos. Karolands stretch from northern shore of the Lake Toba through the Bukit Barisan Mountains and to southern boarder of Aceh, to the east Pakpak.
The capital town of Karo Regency is Kabanjahe. It has 17 districts and 258 villages. The total population is about 276,763.

Most of the Karo society who live in Karo regency and out of Karo regency use Karo language and practice *rebu* in their daily communication. Karo families lived in traditional houses, also called *adat* houses, and there as many as 8 families lived in such houses. Today there are only a few Karo traditional houses. This house is unique, because regulations determined who was living in each part of the house. They were *Kalimbubu, sembuyak* and *anak beru*. There were so many rules accompanying the house, and all of the families who lived in an adat house practiced *rebu* in their communication.

### Definition and branches of *Rebu* in Karo Society

1. **Definition of *Rebu* in Karo Society**

   *Rebu* is a Karonese term meaning “taboo in communication”. *Rebu* is a social avoidance of talking directly between certain people in Karo society, it is an avoidance of body touching, avoidance of sitting face to face and avoidance of sitting on a mat or a board in Karo society. “*Rebu* is a Karonese term which means that certain people are not allowed to talk to other certain people”. (Marbun 2010). People who practice *rebu* in Karo society are *mami, kela, bengkila, permain*, and *turangku*. People who violate the ban are those who do not know the customs. They do not comply with the applicable habits and procedures and such a person will be scorned and despised by many people.

2. **Branches of *Rebu* in Karo Society**

   There are three kinds of *rebu* in Karo society, namely:
   
   *Rebu* between *mami and kela*,
   
   *Rebu bengkila and permain*,
   
   *Rebu turangku and turangku*.

### Procedure of the Translation

Translation methods and translation procedures are different: “translation methods relate to whole texts, translation procedures are used for sentences and the smaller units of language” (Newmark 1988: 81). Newmark explains the different translation procedures as follows

1. **Transference** (loan word, transcription) is the process of transferring an SL word to a TL text.
2. **Naturalization** succeeds the transference it adapts the SL word first to the normal pronunciation, then to the
normal morphology (word-forms) of the TL.

3. Cultural equivalent is an approximate translation where a SL cultural word is translated a TL cultural word but it is not accurate.

4. Functional equivalent is applied to cultural words and requires the use of a cultural free word or specific
   term and it neutralizes the SL and sometimes add a particular.

5. Descriptive equivalent, description sometimes has to be weighed against function. Description and function are essential elements in explanation and translation.

6. Componential analysis in translation:” the basic process is to compare a SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning but is not an obvious one-to-one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components.”

7. Synonymy is used for a SL word where there is no clear one to one equivalent and the word is not important.

8. Through-translation is the literal translation of common collocations, names of organizations and components of compounds. It can also be called as calque or loan translation.

9. Shifts or transpositions is a translation procedure involving a change in lexical categories or in the grammar from SL to TL.

10. Modulation is a variation through a change of a viewpoint, of perspective and very often of category thought.

11. Recognized translation is normally used officially or the generally accepted translation of any institutional term.

12. Compensation occurs when loss of meaning or sound-effect, metaphor or pragmatic effect in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part.

13. Paraphrase is an explanation of meaning of a segment of a text.

14. Couplets occur when the translator combines two, three, or four different procedures.

Discussion

The theory of cultural and descriptive equivalent and shifts or transpositions procedures proposed by Newmark are applied in discussing the process of translating rebu in Karo society.

The writer is a native speaker of Karonese and he practices rebu in his communication with his Mami (wife’s mother), turangku (wife’s brother ‘s wife), and permain (son’s wife) although he lives in a big city.
Sembiring Subur (personal communication, January 10, 2010) claimed: *rebu itu wajib dilaksanakan untuk mengatur hubungan sosial didalam keluarga*—that Karo society should preserve *rebu* in their social life, it is a guidance in their life.

Here is an example of a dialogue between *Bengkila* and *Permain* in a house, his grandson is at home as a mediator.

*Bengkila* : O kempu kataken man permain ena tanggerken kari nakan temuenta sekalak !
*Father in law* : O grandson say to that *permain* cook rice for our guest later
*Permain* : Oe ningen kataken man Lakindu O Nak ku
*Permain* : Say yes to your grandson, o my son.

When there is no one at home to serve as a mediator, they use a thing instead.

*Bengkila* : O Dinding kataken man permain ena tanggerken kari nakan temuenta sekalak !
*Bengkila* : O wall say to that *permain* cook rice for our guest
*Permain* : Oe ningen kataken man Bengkila ena O Dinding
*Permain* : Say yes to that *Bengkila* o Wall.

*Bengkila* and *Permain* practice *rebu* at home; they use her son as a median of their communication. Her son does not need to respond to the request of both directions even though he was asked to respond. The practice of *rebu* still exists in Karo society even though they live in cities. But, I found a few families that do not practice *rebu* in their communication, because their sons married non-Karonese women and they don’t live in Karo regency. Their daughter in law doesn’t practice *rebu* in their culture. But for those daughters-in-law or brothers-in-law who are not Karonese yet live in Karo regency, these practice *rebu* in their communication.

Tarigan (Bp Sastra, personal communication, December 2009) explained *rebu* is a strategy to appreciate someone; if they appreciate someone, they believe that their life will be better. Thus he believes that *rebu* is a way to avoid immorality in their culture.

We will discuss branches of *rebu* one by one below.

1. *Rebu* between *mami* and *kela*

The word *mami* means narrowly “mother of a man’s wife”, and it is widely meant “wife of someone’s mother’s brother”.

In the first sense, the relationship is due to marriage.; if there is no marriage, the relationship between *mami* and *kela* will not be intertwined.

In the second sense, the blood relationship bridges the relationship, we do not have a marriage relationship with their daughter. If there is a relationship that has been reinforced by marriage with their daughter, the more close the familial relationships become.
The word *kela* means “the husband of a couple’s daughter”. This is closely connected with the word *mami* in the narrow sense of the above.

In line with the broad understanding of *mami, kela* can also mean “son of her husband's sister, who married the daughter of a husband and wife”. Before the marriage, these men are *bere-bere* but also *kela* “son-in-law”.

### a. Rebu as social avoidance of talking directly

According to the custom prevailing in Karo Society, communication between *mami* and *kela* is *rebu*; a *mami* does not talk directly with her *kela*, or in the other direction. In other words both *mami* and *kela* must avoid talking directly as a mother does with her son. Because they can not communicate directly; there must be a third person as an intermediary. Through the third person the two convey messages, questions or answers.

There will be a question in our mind: How do they communicate if there is something very important that must be delivered, while there is an absence of a third person that can be used as an intermediary? There are two ways this can be done.

**First:** *Kela* uses the word *nina mami* (meaning “the message of *mami*”) and his *mami* takes the words *nina kela* (meaning “the message of *kela*”) in each sentence that they wish to speak. In other words, *kela* must be clever to use *ernina mami* or “speak *nina-mami*”. So does *mami*, she has to be clever to speak *ernina kela* “talking by using the words *nina kela*”. In doing so, they feel that there has been no direct communication.

Let us have an example of a conversation between *mami* and *kela* as the above, in English, but with the proper formulas inserted in Karo Language.

Kela: Sorry, *nina mami*!
Mami  : What is going on, *nina Kela*?
Kela  : Well, *nina mami*, if it is possible come home soon, 
        *nina mami*!
Mami  : What for, *nina kela*?
Kela  : Your daughter is seriously ill, *nina mami*!
Mami  : Well, well, I ‘ll come soon, *nina kela*!
Kela  : Thank you *nina mami*.
Mami  : I’ll call the shaman first, *nina kela*.
Kela  : All right, *nina mami*.  

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Second: Using things that happen to be in a place can be considered as a medium of communication. Let's assume they use an inanimate stone as an intermediary in their conversation. In this case the end of every sentence that they say must be tagged *nindu o batu*, which means *you say (so) stone*.

By doing so they feel that their communication is not conducted in direct communication, because they have used the stone as an intermediary, whose function can be identified as that of the third person. Of course for those who do not know the Karo custom, it is funny and weird!

Example:

Mami : Where are you going (*nindu o batu*)?
Kela : To rice field (*nindu o batu*)!
Mami : If you are going to go to the field, will you please check all of our levees (*nindu o batu*)?
Kela : Well, I'll soon catch them and bring them to our house (*nindu o batu*)!

b. Rebu of body touching

The second *rebu* concerns touching limbs between *mami* and *kela*, they are not allowed to shake hands either. They are also called *rebu* (meaning “very embarrassing and humiliating”) if they let a touch happen and people will be mocking him into a topic of conversation:

“Don’t be like John. He doesn’t know the customs and he doesn’t know *rebu* either, because he held his *mami*”.

But in matters of extraordinary circumstances when touch must take place, such as severe illness, *mami* can touch his *kela* (or both directions) by first saying *sentabi* which means “sorry”. This may be understandable (even encouraged) by the community, because a person cannot let his *mami* or her *kela* suffer a severe accident or illness without succor precisely because their touching was *rebu*.

Keep in mind that basically *mami* is the mother of *kela*, and *kela* is a child who is loved by *mami*. This is evident from the utterances of *mami* in everyday life.

If a mother has a *kela* and while they are still living together or in any other occasion, the mother always says to her daughter: “have you prepared meals and drinks for my *kela*?” Or if they want to eat, and by chance I have to eat? When her daughter replies: “I have provided it, *mami,*” or “*kela* emak has already eaten earlier!” Then *mami* can eat comfortably.

c. Rebu sitting face to face.

The third *Rebu* between *mami* and *kela* prohibits their sitting face to face, opposing each other with a sharp looks. A *kela* who knows custom and good manners would bow his head and look down when talking or meeting with his *mami*. And a *kela* who knows custom, will not dare to come home to eat at
home if there is only his mami alone unaccompanied by another person, especially such meeting or staying. If no one else is there, that intention will be postponed by the kela.

d. Rebu of sitting on a mat or a board
The other Rebu is found between mami and kela prohibits sitting on a mat or a board with no other people who is sitting between them.

We need to know that the mat is the main seat used by the people of Karo in everyday life and in parties or traditional ceremonies. In Karonese mat is called amak. There are many kinds of amak such as amak cur which is a smooth and small mat which is usually used to seat honored people, and there is amak mbelang, that is “wide mat”, used for seating the average person.

Thus the custom of Karo is considered rebu when mami and kela sit together on a mat, unless there are other people who sit between them, which can be linked to a third person which function as third person in communication between them.

Karo traditional houses called the house of the waluh jabu, “a house consisting of eight families”, are usually wooden. On top of this board floor mats are laid out for sitting. Although the mats have been installed, it should be noted that mami and kela do not have to sit together on the same board, unless if among them there are other people sitting.

Rebu occurs when kela and mami sit together on a sheet board that this is the house-floor, if no one else, who can considered as an intermediary is sitting in between them.

Presumably, in this modern era, rebu between kela and mami occurs when they sit together on a long chair with no third person sitting in between them.

Thus we have pointed out some kinds of rebu between mami and kela. One thing to note in this connection is that mami and kela may belong to the same clan; e.g. both are surnamed Tarigan (or Karokaro, Sembiring, Ginting, Perangin-angin).

2. Rebu between bengkila and permain
Bengkila narrowly means “father of the husband’s wife”, and widely means “the husband of a father's sister”.

In the first sense, the relationship that occurs because of marriage, no marriage relationship will not be bengkila and permain. In this connection the term used, bengkila, is replaced with ajinta.

In the second sense, the blood relationship helps bridge the relationship bengkila-permain, who do not hold a first marriage with their son.

If the blood relationship that has occurred since the original can be reinforced by marriage with their son, such closer familial and marital relationships as these are coveted by elderly people.
The word *permain* in Karo, narrowly means “wife of a son”. This is closely related to the word *bengkila*. More broadly, *permain* can also mean “girls” (even the boys) from a brother’s wife.

Now that we know the relationships between *bengkila* and *permain*, let us examine what kinds of *rebu* are observed among them.

Basically the *rebu* applicable between *mami* and *kela* applies also in relations between *bengkila* and *permain*, namely:

a. *rebu* of talking directly without any third person for intermediary,
b. *rebu* of body touching,
c. *rebu* of sitting on a mat or a board if no one else is sitting between them,
d. *rebu* of sitting face to face.

The usage of the word *nina* also exists in dialogue between *bengkila* and *permain*: *nina bengkila* uses the word *nina permain* “says daughter-in-law” if they have to communicate without a third person as an intermediary.

Further note that the *bengkila* and the *permain* may not belong to the same clan, but to different clans. That may be because a previous husband has died, and in the custom of Karo his *bengkila* recalled the provision that allows one, as a husband, to replace her husband who was dead. Marriage like this in Karo language and society is called *lako man* or *lako mangan*.

### 3. *Rebu* between people who were *turangku*

The word *turangku* has two meanings, depending on the sex of Ego that uses it.

1. If Ego is a man, then *turangku* means “wife of the brother’s wife (or wife’s sister) Ego.
2. If the Ego is a woman, then *turangku* means “husband of his sister's husband (or husband's brother) Ego”.

As clear that the understanding that the people who call each other *turangku* (or shorter: *erturangku*) must be of different gender.

Now about *rebu*, basically all *rebu* contained between *mami* and *kela*, between *bengkila* and *permain*, applies also among the people about *erturangku*, namely:

a. *rebu* of talking directly without any third person as an intermediary,
b. *rebu* of body touching,
c. *rebu* sitting face to face

d. *rebu* sitting on a mat or a board if no one else sitting in between them.

It should be noted that a sub which relates with the above is that both parties used the words “*nina turangku*” which means “besan”, if they have to talk to each other without a third person as intermediary.
Furthermore, it should also note that people may have erturangku from the same clan, and perhaps from a different clan.

**Problems in Translating Rebu into English**

1. **Linguistic problem**

The untranslatability of the words of rebu in Karo language occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitution in English for a Karo Language item.

Example:

Mami : Where are you going (nindu o batu)?
Kela : To rice field ( nindu o batu)!
Mami : If you are going to go to the field, will you please check all of our levees (nindu o batu)!
Kela : Well, I'll soon catch them and bring them to our house (nindu o batu)!

The expression (nindu o batu) are linguistically untranslatable, because that expression does not exist in English.

In the process of translating Rebu, we encountered some types of problems which I myself had problems in translating: rebu, nina kela, nina mami, nina permen, nina bengkila, nina turangku, nindu o batu (which means “you say (so) stone”) all must be tagged. The problems arouse from the expression of rebu in Karo language which have no translation of the same expressions in English.

There are some words in Karo language which relate to people practice rebu, they are mami, kela, bengkila, permak, turangku. None of these words can be translated into a single word in English.

I also have some problems in translating erturangku, “talking by using the word turangku”, lako man or lako mangan, ernina mami or “speak nina-mami”. So do mami, ernina kela “talking by using the words nina kela” pose similar problems.

Coincidentally, Karo language and English, two very different languages share the different basic syntax formation. Karo language has polite expression words namely; ndu, means you (possessive) and kam means you (subject).

Where are you going (nindu o batu)?

Nindu o batu means “say so o batu”.

Nindu o batu in Karo language is a noun phrase. Nindu consists of verb + possessive, and means “you say”. Say so o batu is verb phrase in English.

Ndu “you” (possessive) is a polite expression in Karo language.

Waluh jabu means Karo traditional houses consist of eight families

Waluh jabu means eight families have the same formation but each has different meaning.
There are three kinds of rebu:

1. **Rebu between mami and kela**
   Cannot be translated directly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Karo Language</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mami</td>
<td>Wife’s Mother (WM), Mother’s brother’s Wife (MBWs),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kela</td>
<td>Daughter’s Husband (DH)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Rebu between bengkila and permain**
   Cannot be translated directly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Karo Language</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengkila</td>
<td>Husband’s Father (HF), Husband’s Father’s brother (HFB), Husband’s Father’s Sister’s Husband (HFSH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permain (Permen)</td>
<td>Son’s Wife (SW)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Rebu between turangku and turangku**
   Cannot be translated directly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Karo Language</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turangku</td>
<td>Husband’s Father and Wife’s mother (HFWM), Wife’s Brother’s Wife (WBW), Husband’s Sister’s Husband</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bassnett-McGuire (1988) showed in determining what to use in English the translator must accept the untranslatability of the SL phrase in the TL on the linguistic level. All of these Karonese lexical categories of noun I explain in several words and there is the shift procedure.

**Cultural Problems**

Apart from syntactical problems which I have mentioned here, there is another problem pertaining to culture defined by Peter Mark as “objects, process, institutions, customs, ideas peculiar to one group of people”. The cultural problem lies in the words of rebu in Karo language, they are waluh jabu, kam, ndu, amak cur, amak belang, rebu (Tarigan, Karo-karo, Sembiring, Ginting, Perangin-angin), nindu o batu, ningen ku kela, ningen ku mami, ningen ku. Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in English culture of a relevant situational feature for Karo Language item.
The different concepts of terms of (Tarigan, Karo-karo, Sembiring, Ginting, Perangin-angin) in Karo Language are culturally untranslatable words because the use made of them in English are not at all alike.

The following Karonese cultural terms can not be translated directly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Karo Language</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tarigan, Karo-karo, Sembiring, Ginting, Perangin-angin</td>
<td>Five clans of Karo society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebu</td>
<td>taboo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nindu</td>
<td>Say so (ndu is a polite expression of the second person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ningen ku kela</td>
<td>“Say so to son-in-law”, although he doesn’t need to respond to the request although he is asked to say something</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I find Karonese terms that I cannot translate directly into English and then I use descriptive equivalents as the tools of translation. I cannot find these specific terms in both languages, hence I apply the descriptive equivalents.

Bassnett-McGuire (1988) showed in determining what to use in English the translator must accept the lack of a similar cultural convention in the TL. Karonese cultural terms are difficult to transfer to English because they are not similar and they cannot be translated into English. However, we accept them in each explanation.

Conclusion

From the previous description we can find several conclusions:

1. There are three main types of rebu in Karo society, namely rebu between mami and kela, and rebu between bengkila and permain, rebu between those who are erturangku.
2. Rebu exists between people of different sexes. In our opinion, the ancestors held to the observance of rebu in the past with the intention that both parties love each other, respect each other. With this rebu the distance between them is always controlled, and thus there is very little possibility for the occurrence of things that are not desirable or immoral between both parties.
3. Between mami and kela, bengkila and permain, turangku with turangku, there rebu is the same, namely, it is rebu to speak directly without an intermediary, the touching of is rebu, it is rebu for
them to sit opposite each other, it is *rebu* to sit on a mat or floor-board when nobody else is sitting between them.

4. With the establishment of a marriage between a young man and a girl, *rebu* is associated precisely to the relationship between the two families. That relationship is open, and others are closed because of *rebu*.
References


http://karo.or.id/rebu-dalam-adat-karo.html