Translation – Midway between Linguistic Mimicry and Equivalation of Cultural Codes

SUZANA CARMEN CISMAS
Department of Modern Languages and Communication
The Polytechnic University of Bucharest
313 Splaiul Independentei, sector 6, 060042, Bucharest
ROMANIA
suzanacismas@yahoo.com

Abstract: - A text could be viewed from the cultural perspective, as it has been established that language influences thinking, therefore, people think culturally. The cultural approach to translation stems from the inadequacy of linguistic theories in solving equivalences over the years. Cultures may look similar, but they are specific and different. Their essence can be transposed across cultural borders; therefore, in time, strictly linguistic theories have given way to the cultural, historical, and sociological context of translation, as human activities have always been supported by language and symbol systems within a cultural context. Currently, there is a challenging shift in handling translations, focusing on background and on the performers involved in this activity, rather than on the texts themselves; by so doing, translators go beyond linguistic stereotypes, focusing on socio-economic and cultural factors, and transcend the consumerist theory in which authors are mere text producers and the readers – consumers. In word and message reconstruction efforts, translators become intercultural mediators, favoring such exchanges. Translation no longer is a phenomenon with inexorable nature and borders, but a modern activity, dependent on the dynamic relations in a cultural system.

Key-Words: (un)translatability, equivalation, cultural codes, guidelines, misconceptions, linguistic patterns

1 Introductory definition of key terms

Translations never involve linguistic efforts exclusively. Even perfect in point of grammar, choice of words and artistic effects, they prove worthless or aggressively misunderstood if void of basic equivalations in customs, prejudices, typical patterns of collective regional reasoning and ancient beliefs. The explanation of moral principles, ethnic aspects and social attitudes, is, in most cases, the translator’s duty, and it is never as simple as a footnote. Whole civilizations and national identities must be transposed, occasionally generating impossible versions, as it happened, for instance, with the Japanese translation of Tess of the d’Urbervilles, where Asian readers were unable to understand the tragedy in the protagonist’s sacrifice, because the Nippon society regards it as a normal, unquestionable duty. What is more, such issues are not specific of literary texts, and they generate problems in scientific, technical, or medical translations, due to specific workforce management in certain civilizations.

Translators are vectors of humanism, peace and progress, learned agents of cultural transmission who circulate, knowledge and equivalations around the globe, working discretely in the service of two masters: the author and the public, the source language and the target language. The audience has little understanding of the process, sometimes showing the misconception that it is enough to look up words in a dictionary and write them down in the right order. Even if minimized, the human input is a key factor, much neglected but crucially important when discussing translations nowadays. Since almost all translators currently use word processors, they are increasingly dependent on information technology and need to acquire new skills and tools which largely diminish their work load. IT specialists have realized both the difficulty and the necessity of incorporating human translators and technology. Interpreters are traditional by nature, preserving balance and old-fashioned accuracy; therefore it takes time to change their mindset and persuade them to accept new tools. In perspective, evolving technologies will give translations a much higher profile than they have ever had.

2 Problem Formulation

Where do these developments leave the professional translator? It is plausible to divide the demand for translation into three main groups. The first one is the traditional requirement for versions of publishable quality – translations for dissemination. The second, derived from the information explosion in the twentieth century, needs translations of short-
lived documents for data collection and analysis, unedited in form – translations for assimilation. The last group has on-the-spot translations (the classical role of the interpreter), now in the form of electronic telecommunications – translation for interaction.

Language is the only social institution in the absence of which no other institution can function; it therefore underpins the three pillars supporting any culture. Translation, involving the transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by one social group into the appropriate expression of another group, entails a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. As cultures are increasingly brought into greater contact with one another, multicultural considerations have an ever-increasing importance. Translators deal with words written at a certain time, in unique spaces and sociopolitical situations, so it is the cultural aspect of the text that must be taken into account. The process of transfer, i.e. re-coding across cultures, will consequently allot corresponding attributes vis-à-vis the target culture, to ensure credibility in the eyes of the new reader.

Multiculturalism, currently a widely spread phenomenon, affects all peoples on the planet, altering the international relations emerging from the new world order. Moreover, as technology develops at a steady pace, nations and their cultures have started a merging process whose limit is difficult to predict. A new international paradigm is being established, with boundaries disappearing and distinctions being lost. The once distinct and sharp outlines now fade away.

2.1 Translation myths overturned by reality

1. **Translators are just people who can speak many languages.** This statement circulates outside the translation industry, trying to minimize the specific translation efforts, knowledge, skills and talent.
2. **Translators can work on any subject as long as the material is in a language they know.** Professionals specialize in very different but related areas, to keep up-to-date with the developments. The inexperienced claim they can translate anything.
3. **Translating from one language into another (i.e. Spanish to English) is the same as translating in the reverse direction (i.e. English to Spanish).** There are few professionals proficient in both directions, and clients often think that the matter is irrelevant. Still, translators have dominant languages, and they should work in their dominant language.
4. **Translators can produce any translation with little or no turn-around time.** The truth is that translators need time to produce a quality product.
5. **A native speaker is always a better translator than a non-native one.** This is a myth equal in error to the first we mentioned. Merely being a native speaker does not ensure or guarantee an adequate translation. Translation requires discipline, study, and continual practice. A native speaker of a language does not inherently possess all (or even any) of these qualities.
6. **Translators like it when the client changes their translation after it has been delivered.** After a translator has edited, revised, re-translated, and perfected his version, he will not tolerate alterations, which, however, in 99% of the cases, contain mistakes. Not only does the quality decrease, but translator’s reputation can be questioned.
7. **Only translators who are members of a professional translation organization can translate well.** There are many translators that do an excellent job without ever being members of any organization. The professional organizations are not governing bodies over the worldwide translation industry. A list of satisfied clients from a translator is a far better indication of competence.
8. **Translators can also interpret.** Translation and interpretation are not synonymous: the first involves written material, while the second requires speaking, triggering the use of two very different skill sets.
9. **Translators like to do free translation work.** Most translators are willing to do pro bono work every once in a while. However, they are professionals who need to earn a living by their profession. Translation is not a hobby, and it is not right for clients to ask for free services.
10. **A good translator will take whatever payment the client is willing to give.** Translators have a price and will not deviate from it. Clients try to make them bid against each other for lower sums, but when money decreases, professionals refuse because it will not be worth their time.

2.2 Translation issues

Problems in translations stem from: lexicon, morphology, syntax, textual differences, rhetorical traits, and pragmatic factors. They can be divided into linguistic issues and cultural ones. While the first category includes grammatical differences, lexical ambiguity and meaning uncertainty, the second refers to distinct situational features. Difficulties may also come from over-translation, under-translation, and untranslatability.

Culture is a major problem. A bad version of translated literature may generate misconceptions about the original. Such problems direct attention to the work and the character of translators, to their approaches and to the processes they implement to obtain a good transposition in the target language.
The work of translators is even more difficult than that of artists. Artists are supposed to produce directly personal ideas and emotions in their own language, however intricate and complicated it all may be. Translators’ responsibility is far greater, as they have to re-live another person’s experiences. However accurately the translator may explore the inner depths of the writer’s mind, significant linguistic, emotional, and conceptual discrepancies could still prevent the two texts from being fully equivalent. Therefore, audiences can perceive distinctions between a certain text and its translation, but also between the translations of the same text.

A translator first analyzes the message, breaking it down into its simplest and structurally clearest elements, transfers it at this level into the target language in the form which is most appropriate for the intended audience. Instinctively he concludes that it is best to transfer kernel levels first, and then refine the structures in ways specific to the target language and culture.

2.3 Translation skills and qualities for novice, student and professional translators

A translator has to be tenacious. In his quest for the correct translation, he has to be persistent and stubborn, regardless of the fact that this one word might only earn him a few pennies per hour. And if he does not find it, he must be honest and say so. Unfortunately, in the real world, translators often forget this very important ethical issue, especially when they think that the term they leave out is unimportant to the global understanding of the subject, which is totally unacceptable. Considering the number of dictionaries, reference books, and other support materials on the market, a translator has to learn not to trust them. He has to know which ones are good and reliable and which ones are not.

Above all, translators are good listeners and writers. After understanding the complex message, the writing skills convey it in the target language as eloquently as possible, even when the source text is awkward and poorly written. For literary works, a good translation reflects the style of the source text as closely as possible; therefore a wonderful version of a bad text is not a good translation.

Here follow the four main skills necessary for any translator who begins work in this field: reading comprehension, researching, analytical skills and composition skills.

Reading comprehension

The first phase of the translation process is reading the text. Most mental processes involved in this act are automatic and unconscious; the brain deals with many tasks in such rapid sequences that everything seems to be happening simultaneously. The eye examines (from left to right as far as many Western languages are concerned, or from right to left or from top to bottom in some other languages) a series of graphic signs in succession, which give life to syllables, words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters, and texts. Simply reading a text is, in itself, an act of translation. The brain does not store the words in the mind like data entered into a computer via a keyboard or scanner. After reading, there is no photographic or audio recording of the text. Instead, there is a set of impressions, centered on few words or sentences. The mental processing of the material is of syntactical nature when trying to rebuild the possible structure of the sentence; it is of semantic nature when identifying the relevant areas in the field of any word/sentence; and it is pragmatic when dealing with the logical match of possible meanings with the general context and the verbal co-text.

The difference between a reader and a critic is negligible: the reader trying to understand has the same attitude as the critic, who is a systematic, methodical, self-aware reader. The individual reads and perceives the message, drawing interpretations and inferences on the possible intentions of the author. Translation is a multi-level process in which a map of the original text is being drawn in the mind, at the same time with a map of the text type that should be produced in the target language. Therefore translation is a complex system in which understanding, processing, and projection of the translated text are inter-dependent portions of one structure. Novice/student translators should master the following basic reading comprehension skills:

- Read for gist and main ideas.
- Read for details.
- Identify sense for new words/expressions using components of structural analysis: prefixes, suffixes, roots, word order, punctuation, sentence pattern.
- Get meaning via contextual analysis: synonyms, antonyms, examples, etc.
- Identify writer’s style: literary, scientific, technical, informative, persuasive, argumentative
- Identify the language level in the text: standard, slang, religious, etc.
- Understand cultural references from the choice of words in the text.

Researching skills

There are different types of dictionaries that a translator should refer to: monolingual, bilingual, of idioms, of current English, compiled on historical bases, specialized, (of common errors, of slang, of technical terms), encyclopedic, and of neologisms. Identifying prospective users of the meta-text is very
important in researching, as this dictates the kind of dictionaries to use, the level of presenting information and the balance between the author’s and the reader’s scientific level. Novice / student translators are encouraged to use the following basic research tips and resources:
- Bilingual dictionaries for new words.
- Monolingual dictionaries to check new word usage in the source language & the target language.
- Encyclopedias & glossary lists for specialized terms.
- Software dictionaries, if necessary and available.
- Specialized magazines/journals to become familiar with technical texts.

**Analytical skills**

The translation process is characterized by two stages: analysis and synthesis. During analysis, the translator refers to the proto-text in order to understand it fully. In synthesis, the proto-text is projected according to the translator’s idea about the most likely readership of the meta-text. The target text is monitored for cohesion and coherence, both at micro-level and at the level of the created text and the model in the category to which the text belongs. During such mental work, there is a constant shift of focus between micro-analysis and macro-analysis, between micro-expression & macro-expression, i.e. a constant comparison between the meaning of the single units and the text as a whole, or, on a larger scale, a constant comparison between the sense of the specific text and the comprehensive sense of the corpus which forms the inter-text, whether or not the translator is aware of this fact. Translators should use the following strategies in the analysis stage:
- Identify beginnings and endings of ideas in the text and the relationships between these ideas.
- Identify the best meaning to fit the context.
- Identify structures that best represent the original.
- Get connectors for transitions between ideas.

**Composing skills**

At this point, mental constructions resulting from interpretation need expression & cohesion, as in this passage scheme from idea to the written text:
- Pinpointing discrimination.
- Identifying redundant elements.
- Choice of words (lexicalization).
- Attention to cohesion (inner links).
- Choice of grammatical structure(s).
- Linear order of words.
- Parts of speech.
- Sentence complexity.
- Prepositions and other function words.
- Final form.

For novice/student translators, the following basic strategies prove useful:
- Use correct word order, as in the target language.
- Adequate sentence structure in the target language.
- Ideas expressed in clear target language sentences.
- Rephrase sentences to convey the overall meaning.
- Change the text as a whole to give it a sense of the original without distorting ideas.
- Strategies for problems of untranslatability.
  a. Syntactic strategies:
    - Shift word order.
    - Change clause/sentence structure.
    - Add or change cohesion.
  b. Semantic strategies:
    - Use superordinates.
    - Alter the level of abstraction.
    - Redistribute the information over more or fewer elements.
  c. Pragmatic strategies:
    - Naturalize or exoticize.
    - Alter the level of explicitness.
    - Add or omit information.

### 3 Problem Solution: translation procedures for culturally - bound lexis

Translating seems to be a most difficult task, as it involves not only an accurate equivalisation of communication codes, but also a complex process of suggesting connotations and visions, which could be specific to the original version, but which may often lack plausible correspondents in other idioms. The translator must occasionally be a genius himself, paralleling the author in form and expression, despite working with an entirely different set of lexical components and against a totally distinct background of traditions.

#### 3.1 Translation procedures

The transposition strategies (from SL – source language to TL – target language) defined below do not have a clear-cut division from one another, therefore, to a certain extent; a particular procedure may contain characteristics of others, as well:
1. Transference – SL word inserted into TL text.
2. Naturalization – SL word into TL text, spelling adjusted to TL system.
3. Using cultural equivalent – SL word replaced by TL cultural word.
4. Using synonym – SL word replaced by TL cultural word.
5. Using descriptive equivalent – The translator explains the function of the SL unit, in many words.
7. Using component analysis – SL word replaced by a more general TL word plus one/more TL sense components to complete the meaning not embodied within the first TL word. At a glance it is like the
descriptive equivalent, but significantly shorter, not involving the function of the idea in SL word.
8. Reduction – SL word/phrase, as translation unit, replaced by TL word/phrase which does not embrace a part in the SL word meaning.
9. Expansion – SL word/phrase, as translation unit, replaced by TL word/phrase covering SL meaning plus something else.
10. Addition and note – Addition or note inserted after translating TL word or phrase. This addition is clearly not a part of the translation.
11. Deletion – SL word or phrase, as a translation unit, is dropped in the TL text.
12. Modulation – SL word/phrase, translated into TL word/phrase, with a change in the point of view.

General types:  
(a) Abstract for concrete  
(b) Cause for effect  
(c) One part for another  
(d) Term reversal

3.2 Translator prerequisites
• The standard of education must be high and a degree is essential, not necessarily in languages.
• Postgraduate translation training
• Ability to write impeccably in the mother tongue, in a style and register appropriate to the subject.
• Flair for research
• Command on the other language and knowledge on the culture and customs in that country.
• First-hand experience in the foreign culture, by living or studying where the language is spoken.
• Field specialization (literature, technology, law)
• Minimum equipment & software: computer, word-processor, internet connection, online dictionaries, translation memory, computer-aided translation tool
• The target language is translator’s mother tongue.
• Online translation forums and newsletters.

3.3 Translation checklist

Pre-Translation:
1. The client/ the register of the translation.
2. Contact for queries. Always keep records.
3. Language variant. (e. g. UK / US English)
4. Particular terms for translation consistency
5. The style guide of the translation company
6. Text translated in tables&images (graphic editing)
7. Specific word processing software
8. Use of Computer-Aided Translation
9. Translation memory available

Double-Checking
10. Accuracy, consistency, spelling, font styles
11. Natural flow in the target language

Delivery
12. When, where, how
13. Returned copies of the material sent

Charging and Extra Charges
14. per hour, per word, per page
15. Additional charge for unusual difficulties
16. Additional charge for research/specialised terms
17. Proofread translated text
18. VAT

Payment
19. Method and time

Liability and Compensation
20. Confidential translation
21. Indemnity insurance to cover all possibilities
22. Early job termination leading to compensation

4 Conclusion: ways of increasing quality while decreasing translation costs

• Condense and clarify. Pre-editing materials for translation can reduce costs by 25% and more while ensuring a higher-quality final product. Make the sentence clearer, easier to translate, and easier for the end user to understand. Consider hiring a specialized translation editor to eliminate redundancies, standardize style, or even cut entire sections that are irrelevant to the target reader.
• Avoid jargon. Industry-specific jargon is one of the biggest barriers, preventing quality translations. There also is a personal jargon, specific to any translator, unacknowledged as such by him/her.
• Screen for sports terms. Americans in particular have a fondness for using terms/examples/metaphors from sports. However to the rest of the world, superlatives like home run, touchdown, Hail Mary pass, mean nothing. In addition, making use of sport-centric examples alienates the target audience and slows translators down, resulting in delays and cost overruns.
• Eliminate duplicate text. Many documents include redundant text, which, if not eliminated, results in paying for the same translation twice, or even more. While every text contains some amount of necessary repetitions, the irrelevant ones should be eliminated. In cases of tight budgets, consider referencing duplicate text, i.e. see instructions on pg. 42 rather than re-translate it.
• Make a multilingual glossary. Most businesses have specific terms that always need to be translated in the same way throughout their literature. Creating a multilingual glossary of crucial terms saves time and energy, resulting in a standardized final product.
• Provide context. Good translation depends on context, since words mean different things in different situations. This is especially important in
documents such as a spreadsheet of terms, where no context is available. Providing context allows translators to be more precise in their terminology. Consider giving either supporting documents, or a short summary of what the text is used for.

- **Go metric.** Whether used as measurement unit to give the dimensions of a product, or as a figure of speech such as *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*, America is the odd one out when it comes to metrics. All measurements, speeds, distances, should be converted into metric before sending the document to be translated.

- **Provide documents in read – write format.** Read-only formats such as PDFs are an effective way to exchange documents between users of different systems and platforms, but they slow down the translation process and generate difficulties in standardizing the end product. Many clients want their documents returned with the same layout, look and feel of the original, thus saving desktop publishing time later on. When documents are read-only, this is impossible. Embedded and scanned objects that include text fall into this category too. Consider typing the text below the object so that it is ready for the translator to work on.

- **Collaborate.** Translation consumers can save time and money by paying attention to the human element of the process, along with the technical and linguistic sides. Benefit from the translation team’s expertise rather than just send off files and wait for results. With pre-editing documents for translation, these questions can even be anticipated and answered in advance instructions for translators.

References:

30. Lawler,J,Bae,J,OvertEmploymentDiscrimination by Multinational Firms: Cultural and Economic Influences, Industrial Relations, Vol. 37, 1998