Subtitling: The Transfer of Culture-Specific Words in a Multidimensional Translation

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Abstract

The following article is focused on particularities of transferring culturally marked words in the subtitled translation from English into Russian and Romanian. In the first part of the study the authors outline the analysed type of culture-specific words, summarise the generally acknowledged procedures of transferring culturally marked items and the specifics of subtitling. In the second part of the paper the subtitled translations from English into Russian and Romanian are analysed in order to single out the main factors that determine the choice of a particular translation procedure in Russian and Romanian.

Keywords: subtitling; culture-specific words; specifics of subtitling; theory of translation; multidimensional translation

1. Introduction

Back in 1965, J. Catford wrote that “translation between media is impossible (i.e. one cannot ‘translate’ from the spoken to the written form of a text or vice versa)” (p.53). This statement, although quite radical, could not be considered fully unfounded, as the intersemiotic translation, defined by R Jakobson (1966) is not always possible, and is definitely uneasy.

The technological break-through, however, seems to be extending the horizons of linguistic and cultural transfer: the written translation of a spoken text – subtitling – is no longer a novelty. All along with dubbing it constitutes the main method of translating cinema into another language, and as such, represents only the textual part of a multidimensional message. The subtitles are useless just as a text. They are intended to exist only by being merged with video images and sound – the fact which inevitably determines their specifics.

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The subtitling is obviously subject to particular time and space constraints, while its functions differ from those of a simple written or oral text, as the textual part of any film is not the main bearer of information, but only a complement to the given graphical image and sound. On the other hand, at a purely linguistic level, the subtitled translation provokes as many difficulties as any other regular type of translation – and many of those are tied with the cultural aspects of the interlingual transfer.

The following article is intended to analyse the particularities of transferring culturally-marked items from English into the Russian and Romanian languages within the time and space constraints of subtitling, and considering the particular functions of this type of translation. In the first part the authors clarify the used notion of culture-specific words, sum up the studied procedures for transferring cultural units and outline the particularities of the subtitled translation. The second part represents a study of particular examples from subtitled translations of modern English films into Russian and Romanian.

2. Problem statement

2.1 Defining the notion of culture-specific words

Despite the fact that the notion of culture-specific terms has been quite widely elaborated (Baker, 1992; Newmark, 1988; Florin, 1993; Lungu Badea, 2004), the lack of terminological homogeneity and the specifics of analysing the concept from the perspective of subtitling suggest that we delineate once more its meaning and use.

The term itself, with all the existing varieties – cultural words (Newmark, 1988:94), culture-specific concepts (Baker, 1992:21), realia (Robinson, 1997:222), culture-bound phenomena and terms or culture-specific items (Schäffner, Wiesemann, 2001:32), culturem (Lungu Badea, 2004:27) – clearly states the link between the notion and the source and target culture, referring generally to “words and combinations of words denoting objects and concepts characteristic of the way of life, the culture, the social and historical development of one nation and alien to another” (Florin, 1993:123).

Although the existing classifications of the culture-bound words are quite numerous (for example, Newmark, 1988; Vlahov, Florin, 1980), they are not necessarily relevant in terms of the subtitled transfer, which, however, could benefit significantly from one particular distinction: the culture-specific words and the language-specific expressions and words.

The line between the concept of language-specific and culture-specific in this light is quite subtle, as the language specific items are conditioned by the particularities of national culture and mentality. Their interconnection is undoubted, while the general relation between language and culture suggests language as being the mirror of culture, its treasury, medium and instrument (Ter-Minasova, 2000:14-15).

In the light of subtitled translation, the difference between these two categories is conditioned by the possibility to present a supporting background graphic image with the concept in question. Clearly enough, such a support is available mostly for the objects of material culture, flora, fauna etc. The additional visual information reduces the amount of data that has to be transferred in the target language, influencing, thus, the choice of translation methods and procedures. In the present article the authors intend to focus on the transfer of words which denominate material culture-specific objects from English into Russian and Romanian and to particularly analyse the ways the presence or lack of the background graphic image influences the choice of possible translation procedures.

2.2 General procedures of transferring culture-specific words

The corpora dedicated to the transfer of culture-specific units could not be called merely substantial. The research amplitude is conditioned by the general cultural turn in translation studies, as well as the growing practical need in solutions for resolving difficult cases of cultural transfer, particularly when it is realised in conditions of specific physical constraints.

In this paper the authors did not intend to study the concept in detail, and consider necessary only to summarise the procedures for transferring culturally marked units suggested in the Russian and Romanian literature on the subject. Our primary objective is to evaluate the suggested techniques in the light of their possible practical application in the specific conditions of subtitled translation.

The Russian literature on translation studies presents a well-defined classification of translation procedures used
in the transfer of culture-specific items. Thus, one of the first taxonomies was suggested back in 1953 by A.V. Fedorov who proposed the following differentiation: 1) full or partial transliteration or transcription; 2) creation of a new word or word combination on the basis of existing language elements and morphological relations and 3) using a unit which fulfills a similar (even though not identical) function in the target language (Fedorov, 1953:139). Later on, the author completed the presented classification with the fourth category: 4) the use of a hypernym (Fedorov, 2002:171).

In the Romanian tradition, G. Lungu Badea (2004:108) states that facing cultural transfer, the translator usually chooses between three main options, namely 1) to borrow the foreign term, 2) to use an existing word or collocation with a new sense, or 3) to use an existing word complying as much as possible with the suggested pragmatic functions.

All in all, the choice seems to be wavering between two main strategies: foreignisation or naturalisation - between evidencing the fact that the concept in question is alien to the target culture and enhancing the acceptability of the target text for the readers, but at the same time eliminating its cultural specifics.

Thus the borrowing (Lungu Badea, 2004:108) in Romanian, and transcription or transliteration in Russian (Fedorov, 2002:171), stand for the same procedure which is, in the second case, slightly adapted to the use of a different alphabet. In such a way it would be probably more just to say “borrowing by means of transliteration or transcription”, specifying that the word does not suffer any modification, except for the transition to a different graphic form.

Vlahov and Florin (1980: 92) make a general differentiation between word transcription and any kind of translation, the latter being divided into several categories:

- Translation of realia;
- Transcription of realia:
  - Introducing a neologism (calques, semi-calques, assimilations, semantic neologisms);
  - Approximate translation (the use of hyponyms/hypernyms; functional analogies; description, explication, interpretation);
  - Contextual translation (zero translation (omission) with the transfer of the unit’s meaning in the context).

The last classification presents a well-differentiated system of particular translation procedures, emphasising, however, their general orientation of naturalising the target text for the readers or bringing out its cultural specifics. Thus it will be used in studying the particular possibilities of applying translation procedures in the conditions of specific constraints of subtitling, and, further, while analysing practical cases of transferring culture-specific units in subtitled translation.

2.3 The specifics of subtitling

In films the meaning is carried out by multiple channels - both verbal and non-verbal ones (Gottlieb, 2001). Although it might seem that subtitling implies transmitting only the verbal part of a movie, in fact it could be described as a restitution of a multi-channelled message into another language. Consequently, the translation of the textual part should be realised only with a close consideration of the non-verbal elements and their relation to the words, as “the difference between an audio-visual text, such as a film, and other types of texts, such as telegrams or novels, is the relative importance of the verbal and non-verbal signs, the relationship between the two types of signs and the amount of “space” or time taken up by each type in the total volume of the text” (Zabalbeascoa, 1997: 339).

The informative value of video image and sound is crucial, if not primary, in the multidimensional translation. The text as such, especially the subtitled translation is perceived as something additional, complementary to the film itself, and thus should by no means contradict the image, but “contribute to the evolution of the narrative, typify the characters and/or make them more realistic and supply comments on the action” (Ramael, 2001:16).

Apart from the multidimensional character of the subtitled translation, there are also some purely physical requirements to be met. Thus the size and time standards for subtitling are quite well-defined: the line should contain the maximum of 35-40 characters, while only two lines are permitted on the screen at the same time. In case of bilingual subtitles, it is customary to use one line in each language. As far as the synchronisation with the action is concerned, the subtitles are supposed to appear 0.25 seconds after the utterance starts, remain on the screen for 3-6 seconds and disappear at most 2 seconds after the utterance is finished. If the subtitle contains just one word, it should stay on the screen for at least 1.5 seconds. This timing is the most efficient in giving the audience a chance to
capture a sight of the action, look down to prepare for the subtitle, grab the text and turn back to the action on the screen (Fong, 2009:94).

The time and space constraints imposed in subtitling bring along an inevitable loss in the volume of information, transmitted through the verbal part of the movie. Such a loss is determined by the transition from speaking into writing, as the average reading speed is lower than the speaking speed. For instance in Britain “the average reading speed of adult viewers is estimated at 66% of the average speaking speed” (De Linde, Kay, 1999, p.11). Moreover, the loss in the volume of information can be aggravated due to unique peculiarities of grammar and lexis of the target-language. For instance, a target-text in Russian is generally around 30% longer than the source-text in English (Fedorov, 2002), which would mean even less space for subtitles in the Russian translation.

However, “due to intersemiotic redundancy (positive feedback from visuals and soundtrack) much current reduction… is neutralized, so viewers miss less of the content of the film than a merely linguistic analysis might indicate” (Gottlieb, 2001:21). As films employ various modalities of transmitting sense, the translation of movies should not be considered only in their verbal dimension. The choice of translation strategies and procedures is influenced both by time and space constraints, as well as by the presence of background image and sound. Considering subtitling as a multimodal translation suggests a close analysis of the way the meaning is composed as a combination of various semiotic modalities, which allows us to state the functional load of the verbal part and the way it interacts with the other semiotic modes in a movie (Taylor, 2003).

3. Suggested solution

The time and space constraints of the subtitling interfere greatly with the possible application of the said translation procedures. Thus, some of the procedures, which were included by Vlahov and Florin (1980:92) into the “approximate translation” category – description, explication, interpretation – usually produce a much more verbose piece of writing than the time and space constraints would permit; even more so if the TL general structure and lexis is commonly larger than those of the SL.

Considering the lack of space, the translator’s choice usually lies between 1) borrowing the culturally marked word 2) using a neutral hypernym or a functional equivalent of the target language or 3) omitting the word in question, leaving the meaning understood from the context (Vlahov and Florin,1980:92).

A positive decision to borrow a foreign notion is conditioned by its importance in the narrative. Films are usually full of culturally-marked items, most of which are insignificant for the action – these are common details of source culture life style and environment. As overloading any kind of text with foreign lexical material results inevitably in obscuring the sense and infesting the native language with foreign borrowings (Fedorov, 2002:139), in subtitling, loans of foreign notions are relatively rare - they are usually applied in case the specifics of the word is crucial to the narrative.

Such would be, for example, the words that are used solely due to their cultural value. In this case, the items in question are usually represented on the screen, while their value and peculiarity is explained additionally in the context. For instance, Whale Rider (2002) presents the life of the New Zealand Maori tribe, whose chief is looking for a new leader. The picturesque scenery and colourful episodes let the viewer glance inside an old and singular culture, whose younger generation makes a new way in its history. The plot includes a great number of specific items of material culture, such as waka – a traditional canoe used mainly for rituals, and taiaha – a traditional weapon. These items are meaningful in the plot not only as specific objects, but through their spiritual value for the people of Maori – as a sign of maturity, unity and manhood. Taking into account the presence of the supporting visual image, the loan of these notions is fully justified – and it is exactly how the Romanian translation proceeded. The translation into Russian, however, contains only one loan – таяха – the transcription of taiaha, while waka is transferred using a hypernym – лодка (boat). Considering the ritual importance and the size of this particular type of canoe (which is significantly larger than the units which are usually named boat (лодка) in Russian), the hypernym fits rather poorly in the context, and the transliteration seem to be preferable – уака.

The less important items are usually transferred with the use of a neutral hypernym, or omitted, as their meaning is deduced from the context. From this aspect subtitling is greatly favoured in comparison with the other types of translation, as its context includes images and sound all along with verbal material, which constitutes a nearly perfect way of representing the given foreign notion with all its specifics.
In the recent movie *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), the name of a specific American stretching toy (jelly-man) was omitted in the subtitled translation both into Russian and Romanian: eng. “This is a place of business, not a place for jelly-man toys” – ro. “Este un loc de afaceri, nu un loc de jucării!” – rus. “Это рабочее место, а не место для игрушек!” As the type of the toy is understood from the picture, the hypernym translation manages to convey the necessary sense and comment on the action.

The applied procedure should be chosen with a particular consideration of the source-element function. In the same movie, the translator into Romanian decided to borrow the name of a typical American pastry – *cinnamon roll*, or as it is used in the film – *cinnabon*, while the Russian translator favoured a description and the use of a hypernym: *булочка с корицей*, *булочка*. In this case the informative value of the hypernym translation and the use of a loan is nearly the same, as they both clarify only the generic notion (Fedorov, 2002:176-177). However, the use of a hypernym or a descriptive translation all along with the visual image assures the maximum clarity and acceptability of the text, while the loan, even if its meaning is specified graphically, seems excessive and unjustified, considering the general unimportance of the item in the narrative.

All the same, the hypernym translation seems to be preferable in another scene of the same movie, in which the main hero is swimming in the ocean with a shark circling him. In order to calm him down, the captain of the ship shouts it is not a shark, but a *porpoise* – a species related to whales and dolphins. The translation into Romanian gives a hypernym – ro.: *delfin* (dolphin), which allows the viewer to make an instant distinction: *alike but harmless*, as dolphins are widely known and perceived as friendly mammals. On the contrary, the Russian translator uses an exact biological equivalent: *морская корова* (lit.: see cow), which is not widely known for being a representative of the dolphins and whales family, and provokes an association with cows, which does not fit with the image of a fin rising from the water. Thus, the exact literal translation fails to convey the meaning *similar but friendly*, which could be maintained with the use of a hypernym.

In some cases, however, the hypernym translation is not acceptable for stylistic or semantic reasons. For example, in one of the scenes of *The Spectacular Now* (2011), the father of the main hero brings to the table a pitcher of beer, saying: “A fresh pitcher!” Neither in Russia, nor in Romania is beer served in pitchers – this fact excludes the possibility of a literal equivalent (rus. *кувшин*, ro. *іксіор*). The use of a hypernym (rus. *посуда*, *сосуд*; ro. *vas*) would also be quite unfortunate, as it would contradict the colloquial style of the conversation. Thus in the translations both into Russian (“Свежее пиво!”) and Romanian (“Bere rece!”) the word naming the recipient is omitted altogether, stating only the name of the drink. This procedure corresponds to the third category of the used classification (Vlahov, Florin, 1980) and illustrates the wide possibilities of the graphic context – due to the image, the viewers understand exactly in what vessel beer is brought to the table.

The lack of a supporting graphic image changes completely the conditions of translating, as it practically reduces the context to the textual part – already limited and transient as it is. In such cases, loans are extremely unfavoured, as the verbal context usually fails to provide information necessary to perceive the specifics of the subject or notion. For example, right in the beginning of *The Descendants* (2011), the main character mocks the general opinion on the lifestyle of the residents of Hawaii: “We are all just out here, sipping Mai Tai’s”. The latter is a typical tropical cocktail with rum, widely known in the USA. Both in Russian and Romanian subtitles the translators decided to borrow the name of the drink, which, however, remains unclear for the main part of the audience. The viewers are able to understand only that it is a kind of drink as it is used with the verb “to sip”. This obscurity in meaning results in losing the hint of sarcasm. Consequently, the use of a hypernym seems more appropriate, as it would maintain the emotional colour of the expression: eng.: “sipping Mai-Tai’s”; ru. “потягивая коктейли”; ro. “și savurăm cocktailuri”.

*The Spectacular Now* (2011) also presents a case of using a culturally-marked notion without graphical context, namely the description of a sunset with a typical type of ice-cream: “A Butterscotch Sundae with strawberry swirls that melts right into the ocean”. This metaphor gives a rather vivid, dynamic image, which could hardly be recreated by means of literal translation or loan. In fact, both Russian and Romanian subtitles fail to produce the same effect of the comparison: ro. “înghețată Butterscotch cu caprunci care se topește în ocean”; ru. “ириски с фруктами, смешанные в клубничном водовороте”. In this case, the culturally-marked item is valuable only as a bearer of a particular image of colour and texture. Consequently, a functional equivalent is needed in order to maintain the stylistic shade of the expression: ru.: “гавьший в океане пломбир с ванилином и клубникой”. This choice is, however, conditioned by the presence in Russian language of a typical ice-cream that could be used in a similar
metaphor – “пломбир”. In the Romanian language, it seems to be adequate to use a hypernym, which would still maintain the stylistic patterns of the original expression: „Înghețată de capșuni și caramel care se topește în ocean”.

4. Conclusions

The time and space constraints of subtitling, as well as the continuous interaction with other semiotic means, create absolutely singular conditions for translation. The choice of translation procedures should be made after a detailed analysis of the needed informative and stylistic function of the given piece of text.

As we have stated, considering the transfer of culturally-marked material items, the choice of the translator lies between borrowing the word in question, using a hypernym or a functional equivalent of the target culture, or omitting the word as it is. The choice of one of these procedures is conditioned by: 1) the importance of the item in the narrative, 2) its function in the narrative and 3) the presence or lack of a supporting graphic image.

Due to the transient character of both visual and verbal contexts, loans should be avoided unless they are crucial to stress the cultural value and specifics of the translated notion. The use of a hypernym is favoured by the presence of a supporting background image; the lack of such an image, particularly if the transferred item has a specific stylistic function (irony, metaphor), suggests the use of a functional equivalent or a hypernym.

However, it is impossible to give a single, „standard” recipe for any kind of translation, even in the strictest time and space conditions and referring to a particular pair of source and target languages. The ultimate factor is always the function of the translated element and its relation to the entire piece (Fedorov, 2002), which in the case of subtitling includes both verbal and nonverbal elements. The critical assessment of the real informative, stylistic and cultural function of the given element is the only way of maintaining a subtle balance between overloading the target text with foreign material and eliminating the source-culture specifics of the film.

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