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Translator Training in Romania and Advertising Watchdogs – A Functionalist Approach

Alina-Roxana Zamfira*

University of Craiova, A I. Cuza Street, No.13, Postcode 200585, Romania

Abstract

Following a corpus analysis of magazine advertisements, a series of aspects are highlighted in the “translation” practice of ads from English into Romanian, which are deemed to require the (re)designing of policies both at the level of higher education and that of legal institutional frameworks. It is for the academia, as opinion leaders, to raise awareness of the formal irregularities in the content of ads, because advertising is both object and agent in mass communication cultural shaping. The end product of translation should be institutionally and organizationally regulated, supervised and sanctioned.

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1. Introduction

The paper intends to emphasize the need in Romanian higher education for a more coherent approach in the study of advertising as a process of linguistic production, with a stress on the translation of ads from English into Romanian (although translation is not the only means of producing ads in Romanian). Given the recurrent inconsistencies and misfires identified in the output of such a process, and the fact that advertising is both object and agent in mass communication cultural shaping, we deem it necessary to (re)design policies firstly at the level of university education; secondly, with respect to the aesthetic or moral qualities of ads, it is for advertising watchdogs to regulate and sanction such matters. Therefore, a rethinking of legal institutional frameworks should also be envisaged.

The paper is based on a corpus study of commercial advertisements in women’s magazines, namely 16 consecutive issues of Glamour (May 2009 – August 2010), a monthly magazine which is edited in both English

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0040251411552
E-mail address: roxanazamfira@yahoo.com
A theoretical background of functionalist approaches in the translation of ads will be outlined, as we consider these to best apply to illustrate our point. Subsequently, a discussion based on examples from the corpus will complete the theoretical considerations and will lead to a set of conclusions.

2. Theoretical background of functionalist approaches in the translation of ads

As has been signaled oftentimes in translation studies (notably, Kelly and Martin [1], assessment and trainer training are elements which have lagged behind in approaching translator training.

Theoretical approaches regarding the translation of ads can be identified with Newmark [2] and Neubert [3] who explain how the form of translation can change depending on its function.

The distortion of an advertisement when translated from one culture into another has been noted by many translation theorists, e.g. Katan [4]: “translating for the advertising industry across cultures means distorting the surface message to successfully retain the hidden.”

The question is then, if we distort the surface message, what will be retained? In discussing Jakobson’s poetic function in relation to ads, Cook [5] appreciates that the meaning of a message cannot be separated from its form, “from the message’s unique graphological, phonological, grammatical and lexical structure.” [5] Therefore, in the case of texts where the poetic function plays an important role, such as advertisements, a translation cannot be equal to the original message, but only equivalent.

The term “copy adaptation” is used by Schäffner [6], who explains it on account of the identical reactions which must be triggered both by the original text and its transposition into the target language.

Toresi [7] comments that there is a difference between the translation of advertisements and that of literary texts, concerning the manner in which each of these processes deals with otherness, with differences from one culture to another. An equivalent effect is achieved once the receivers of a message have recognized what is presented to them as relevant to their own culture, in their own terms. The advertiser’s goal is to establish connections between the advertised product and the target public’s profile, not to point out differences, and these connections must be preserved in the process of translation.

The message of an ad is conveyed by a multiplicity of sign systems, among which words constitute only a part.

But it is the functionalist approach to translation which is of interest to the present paper. The main point of functionalist approaches is summarized by Schäffner [6] as follows:

“It is not the source text as such, or its effects on the source text recipient, or the function assigned to it by the author, that determines the translation process and the linguistic make-up of the target text, as is postulated by equivalence-based translation theories, but the prospective function or purpose of the target text as determined by the initiator’s (i.e. client’s or commissioner’s) needs. Consequently, the purpose (skopos) is largely constrained by the target text user (whether reader or listener) and his or her situation and cultural background. A theoretically sound definition of translatorial action must therefore take account of all the elements involved in human communicative action across cultures; in particular, it must take into consideration the client’s culture, the process of text production in its widest sense, and the concept of expert action.” [6]

Among the main points of criticism against the functionalist approaches expressed by various authors, Schäffner [6] notes Nord [9], who believes that the limits of translation proper are transgressed and the original is not respected; at the same time, this point of view is contested by authors like Snell-Hornby [10], who argues for a wide definition of translation, which is “indeed closer to the realities of translation practice.”

Schäffner [6] also notes criticisms regarding the applicability of skopos theory to literary translation: “It has been argued, for example, that to assign a skopos to a literary text is to restrict its possibilities of interpretation.”
Chesterman [11] is also mentioned, who draws our attention to the fact that, although the intended skopos may be fulfilled by a translation, the same cannot always be said about the lexical, syntactic, or stylistic level. Another problem refers to the fact that, “the focus on translation being ‘commissioned’ by clients has led some scholars to argue that functionalism turns translators into mercenaries (Pym [12] 1996) who simply do what their clients want them to do.” [6]

In addition, Nord [9] introduced the concept of “loyalty” in order to stress the “responsibility translators have toward their partners in translational interaction,” namely towards the author(s) of the source text, as well as towards the clients and users of translations. Nord’s point is that the skopos of the target text must be compatible with the intentions of the source text author(s). [6]

3. Applying translation functionalist approaches to ads

Regarding the application of translation functionalist approaches to advertisements, first of all, as has already been pointed out, there are delimitations between the “adaptation” of ads and the notion of translation “proper”.

As for the fact that the text of advertisements shares attributes with literary texts, in that its formal qualities bear meaning in themselves, in our view, the poetic function of ads is subordinate to the conative function. Therefore, if the “skopos” of an “adapted” advertisement is to persuade a target public to buy a product, it may well happen that the aesthetic function of a text in the source ad be sacrificed if the target ad fulfills its persuasive function in a different manner. And indeed, this fact does justify the opinion that translators of advertisements may be considered “mercenaries”, who simply “execute orders”.

But even at this point, it is our opinion that the above consideration is far-fetched. We should not forget that (commercial) advertisements are neither aesthetic, nor moral artefacts at their origin, but products of an economic activity. All their other functions besides the persuasive one, which gives them reason to exist, are adjacent or incidental. Translators of the advertising material are not “mercenaries”, but agents in a necessary communicative process which takes place under well-defined circumstances.

The analysed corpus of ads brings forward a few examples of irregularities in translation, which question the above considerations. They are connected to a disregard for Romanian grammar rules, to a failure to take into consideration cultural differences, and to ignoring consumer rights and interests.

A first example refers to a tendency in Romanian advertising language to address the target public by using the singular form in pronouns and in verbs, triggered by the fact that, in English, the second person is not morphologically differentiated for the singular and the plural: “Your silky soft skin will giggle every day when you experience new NIVEA® Happy Time body lotion.” [13] versus “Răsfață-te pe deplin cu Nivea Happy Time” [14]. This preference for the singular probably aims to convey a feeling of closeness, to eliminate formality. Nevertheless, the receiver might feel verbally aggressed, s/he might perceive a form of impoliteness and consequently, s/he will refrain from “getting closer”. But this is not the case with all the advertisements in our corpus of magazines, e.g.: “Descoperiți aurul care vă potrivește!” [15] Such inconsistencies prove that there is no clear convention regarding the use of those forms in advertising language and that all depends on the copywriter’s or translator’s momentary inspiration.

Another observation linked to a Romanian variant concerns the use of the verbal form “e” versus “este”. According to Zafiu [16], the latter form is preferred in formal registers, whereas the former is predominantly used in informal situations. Consequently, the choice of the form “este” in the construction: “Frumusețea este bucurie” [14] versus “Beauty is full of life” [13] is supported neither by context nor by other morphological traits of the text, particularly by the use of the second person singular forms of pronouns and verbs (“zâmbeste”, “răsfață-te”, “pielea ta”, “te încarcă”, “pentru ca tu să te simți” [14]).

In the same example of Romanian ad [14], we notice the annoying presence of a cacophony, a fact which proves the carelessness with which the text was written: “Parfumul de Flori de Portocal te încarcă cu energie” [14] versus “Infused with the gorgeous feel-good scent of orange flower, it’s what happiness is made of.” [13]
Another example is from an ad for shampoo, which is centred upon a flight metaphor, derived from the fact that the product allegedly creates “weightless volume” [17] for a woman’s hair – the pictorial element shows a flight attendant with wavy hair who floats above nectarine orchards, while the words seem to come from a plane pilot: “Shampoo. Condition. Prepare for take-off. Uplifting Volume from Herbal Essences. With playful pink coral flowers and white nectarine extracts. For weightless volume, fasten your seatbelt.” [17]

There are at least two problems with the Romanian variant of the ad. Firstly, in the injunction: “Decolează cu gama volum la înălțime: șampon și balsam de la Herbal Essences” [18], although in keeping with the flight metaphor, the verb “a decola” in the imperative sounds bizarre when addressed to a human being. Secondly, for the Romanian target public, the same injunction may trigger cultural connotations which are not so fortunate in the given context: there is a popular song called “Ridică-mă la cer” (“Raise me up to the sky”), played by the band “B.U.G. Mafia”, with Loredana, one of the prominent Romanian pop artists, who sings the title line of the song in a sensuous and sexually insinuating way.

Other examples illustrate the problem of consumer rights which are disregarded in the case of the Romanian pairs of ads. In an ad for a Nivea product, the English text contains a call to action urging the readers to visit the company’s website and it promises a reward: “For your free sample visit www.NIVEA.co.uk/naturalbeauty” [19] The Romanian ad does not make such a promise, but it does make a rather vague elliptical statement: “Testat și apreciat de cititoarele Glamour. www.NIVEA.ro/naturalbeauty” [20]. Without providing any factual data about, for example, how many Glamour readers have tested the product, what exactly they appreciate about it, etc. this statement is likely to mislead consumers under false pretences.

Another aspect which deserves our attention regards the presence of disclaimers in ads. An example of an ad for mascara bears such a disclaimer at the bottom of the page in the English variant: “Lily Cole wears The Max Volume Flash Mascara. Shot with lash inserts.” [21] The elliptical construction “Shot with lash inserts” is necessary in order to avoid any misinterpretation on the part of consumers, who might think the model’s eyelashes come to look the way they do in the picture just by using the advertised mascara – we note that the A.S.A., the advertising watchdog in the U.K., sanctioned the firm L’Oréal when it failed to provide such information in an ad featuring Penelope Cruz [22]. In the Romanian ad, there is no such disclaimer. Advertisers provided the name of the model who wears the product (“Lily Cole poartă The Max Volume Flash Mascara” [23]), but they did not say anything about the model’s fake eyelashes. This proves that those in authority, who should regulate the content of women’s magazine ads in view of consumer protection in Romania, either lack the legal provisions to take action, or they are not as vigilant as those in the U.K.

Conclusions

The misfires in the translation of texts from English into Romanian prove, firstly, the translators’ negligence; secondly, their ignorance of theoretical patterns to be followed; thirdly, the level of confusion in the Romanian linguistic environment regarding changing lexical and grammatical patterns. Moreover, the lack of reaction from the part of Romanian advertising watchdogs points, as we have already noted, at a legislative gap, and at the fact that Romanian advertisers are less open and willing to adjust themselves to consumers’ needs and preferences than their counterparts in other countries (e.g. the U.K.).

Retaining Schäffner’s [6] above mentioned concept of “expert action”, and Nord’s [9] idea of the translator’s “loyalty” / “responsibility” toward their partners, there arises the question of how “expert” and “responsibility” should be defined in the case of our examples of translation products. It is our belief that these theoretical guidelines should materialize into more concrete regulating frameworks of translation production; translation should fulfil its communicative purpose smoothly, and not run the risk of bringing “ruin” to an environment invaded by so-called barbaric, uneducated and uncontrolled “mercenaries”.

Translation is a necessary communicative activity, while advertising, with its ubiquitous presence, is a powerful force in the shaping of people’s cultural reflexes. An intertwining of the two results, as we can see, in
negative phenomena which, if consistently perpetuated, can only lead to degeneration on several levels: linguistic, judicial and cultural. The role of advertising watchdogs should be strengthened, following the model of a country like the U.K.; regarding the involvement of higher education in the regulating of the field, it is at university level that clear theoretical procedural guidelines should be established from the outset, thus generating self-balancing processes.

References