On perception of culture codes in German translations (based on works by M. Bulgakov)

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Abstract

The article studies culture codes transformation in the German translations of the works by the Russian classic M. Bulgakov. To study the specifics of interpreting Russian culturemes, the semiotic method is employed, which allows identifying various connotations that convey information about the source language culture. Interpretation of the source and the target passages implicating the culture codes of “Meal”, “Clothes” and “Interpersonal Relations” suggests that their semiotics is mostly equivalent yet not identical. This may be due to culture asymmetry as well as to the translators’ capacity to perceive the semantics and the pragmatics of the source text.

Keywords: M. Bulgakov; German translations; culture code; culture asymmetry; cultureme; semiotics.

1. Introduction

Language and culture phenomena interaction has recently become the focus of attention in modern translatology (Bassnett, 2002, p. 2). Translation is not just a venue for two languages, yet for two cultures, to come into contact: “Differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure” (Nida, 2000, p. 130). Given that approach, any translation may be viewed as some information in the target language that functions within the target language culture, about some information in the source language that is related to the source language culture. The most significant obstacles to translation can be faced in cases where the
very situation described in the text of the source language does not exist in the experience shared by the members of a culture speaking the target language, which is the case when the source text refers to the so-called culturemes (Vermeer, & Witte, 1990, p. 137; Nord, 1997, p. 34), culture-specific concepts (Baker, 1992, p. 21), culture-specific references (Antonini, 2007, p. 160), cultural words (Newmark, 2010, p. 173) – “social phenomenon of a culture X that is regarded as relevant by members of this culture and, when compared with a corresponding social phenomenon in a culture Y, is found to be specific to culture X” (Nord, 1997, p. 34). Conveying functions and connotations of such culture-specific lexis is a “translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text” (Aixelá, 1996, p. 58). However, even in this case a challenging task faced by the translator is not insurmountable as any human language has a structure allowing description of new situations never seen before. Otherwise the language would be of no communicative value as it could be used only to express something already known to others.

The process of translation implies “semantically and stylistically adequate neutralization of the structural differences between the two languages while the translator here reproduces the source message employing a number of operations on codes switching thus making the meaning comprehensible for the target recipient” (Wilss, 1977, p. 62, own translation). The target text, therefore, is a result of the creative activity performed by the translator who makes decisions regarding the selection of means to be used in order to adequately depict a piece of culture-bound semantics of the source text in the language functioning within the target culture. The link between a verbal text and the cultural environment where the text functions may be studied with the reference to the semiotic approach: “Semiotics takes for granted that anything can function as a sign. Words and images, cultural artifacts and secret codes, thoughts and feelings, plants and animals, lines and colors, smells and tastes – everything is potentially a sign pointing to something else” (Hodgson, 2007, p. 164). The contemporary science of translation takes the connection between the translation and semiotics as axiomatic, as “translation […] is a phenomenon of sign reality and as such it is the object of study of semiotics” (Petrilli, 2001, p. 278–279). Speaking of literary translation a note should be made that the above-mentioned approach brings to the foreground the explication of such phenomenon as the semiotic culture code. Works on Semiotics analyze the environment of culture codes – secondary sign systems where various material and formal tools are employed to denote culture-related meanings, or value-related content, developed by the human through world perception” (Kovshova, 2008, p. 60). A culture code is information, which is coded in a certain way, and which allows to identify the culture. This makes it obvious that a culture code is a meta-level of the semiotic area. A text, a literary text, above all, manifests a clearly defined link between a language and a culture, and therefore in case of translating such texts, culture codes make an important component required to achieve translation adequacy. A translator dealing with a literary text shall not be clear from personal preferences when interpreting the semiotics of culture codes and selecting an equivalent in the target language since “A translator is far from a machine-like individual producing replicas, but possesses a flesh-and-blood mind that does, knows, says, believes, hopes for, rejects, denies, or supposes” (Gorlée, 2007, p. 248).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the ways of preserving culture codes in the Russian-to-German translation of prose works by Mikhail Bulgakov. The research is based on the German versions of the stories by M. Bulgakov, which are a part of the translation volume “Ich habe getötet” (I Have Killed). The volume was issued in 1979 by Volk und Welt – a publishing house based in Berlin, and the translations were performed by Thomas Reschke famous for his rendering of Russian classical literature into German. Besides, there is analysis of some examples taken from “The Master and Margarita” (by M. Bulgakov) and the respective translations by Thomas Reschke (1968) and Eric Boerner (2012). We are not going to interpret the investigated subject within translation criticism as our task here is to study the translator’s world vision, which expresses the German mentality through the outlook of the translated Russian classical literature.

2. Methodology

The methodology for this research results from further development of the theoretical principles and approaches offered by the contemporary Linguistics and Philosophy. From the stance of our study, the Cooperative-Activity Approach would be the relevant one. This approach implies studying a literary piece as a unique system that has developed due to cooperation of a set of agents of action (the source text author and the translator, first of all) and
reveals openness and self-development.

The Systemic approach used in relation to the object of our investigation we lin k, above all, with the idea of viewing translation communication as a single substance constituted by interacting of hierarchic elements of various levels, while such elements make a single whole and are connected with cause-and-effect relations, so meaning-making in translation communication depends on the functioning of the entire system and not to each single of its elements.

The Synergetic approach taken as the basis here, implies

- Synergy of the joint activity by a number of communication subjects within literary translation, whereas a typical feature of this is non-linear meaning-creating potential resulting in the generation (in the target literary text) of a set of culture codes intended by the author of the source text, and connotations linked to personal, social, and cultural features to be found in the translator’s activity;
- Potential employment of the “double subjectivity” principle to be applied to literary translation when depicting the fiction reality that is described through the prism of both the author’s outlook and the translator’s interpretation of a literary work;
- Self-organization of literary text translation pragmatics, which allows the dual status in the bifurcational solutions used by the translator when decoding semiotic culture codes that appear as subject to the objective factors within the translator’s actions, i.e. in this case the translator acts as a tool to the attractors beyond his control, and at the same time as solutions within a choice of equivalents in the target language based on subjective factors, which include the translator’s ability to properly perceive the theme and the point of the source literary text;
- Acceptance of the postnonclassical postulate of the studied object’s properties being determined by the conditions within its environment (the discursive environment giving rise to the original and the translation).

We also employed the general scientific complementarity principle following which the study involves both linguistic and semiotic methods to analyze the investigated material. This work presents an endeavor not to conduct a separate study of linguistic and semiotic differences in the source and the target texts respectively yet to investigate culture codes as categories related simultaneously to two aspects, i.e. culture and linguistic phenomena expressed on the level of the text as a whole.

Research Methods. In order to achieve the objectives a number of mutually complementary methods have been employed through this work. The major method used was the descriptive one. Apart from that the following ones have been used: comparative method for interpreting specific issues about translation reception of culture codes in works by M. Bulgakov, which allows detecting translation equivalents for the targeted objects within a text created in a different linguo-society; situation-context analysis based on detecting connections of a certain culture code with the discursive context where such code is used; semiotic analysis, which is linked to viewing both the source and the target text as a system of symbols, which implies connecting a certain meaning to a certain way of its expression, i.e. the signified and the signer.

The research algorithm could be structured in the following way:

Step 1. Formulating the aims and building the terminology body for the study.
Step 2. Identification (through situation-context analysis) of micro-contexts manifesting a discord between the actual content and the content-conceptual meaning in the target text on the one hand, and in the culture of the source language on the other, and fixing their significance within the context of the differences to be observed in the Russian author’s worldview and that of the German translators.
Step 3. Selecting within such micro-contexts the culture codes of “Meal”, “Clothes”, “Interpersonal Relations” and the means of representing those in the source and the target languages.
Step 4. Verification of the researcher’s conclusions reflecting the dependence of culture codes reception on the specifics lying within translation communication and the sociocultural parameters pertaining to the environment where it functions, where below techniques were used:

- Investigation of linguocultural notes from definition dictionaries of the Russian literary language, which reveal specific culturemes in the sociocultural environment of M. Bulgakov’s times;
- Analysis of newspapers dating back to the times when the source text was created, which showed the relic of the Soviet past;
• Use of verifying excerpts from other works by the author in question as well as his contemporaries and some authors of later periods provided their books were based on documentary sources;
• Critical analysis of travelers’ notes by foreign writers who, like M. Bulgakov, also described similar phenomena from the life of the Soviet common people.

**Step 5.** Conclusion on the peculiarities of culture code reception in German translations of short stories by M. Bulgakov and his novel “The Master and Margarita”.

**Hypothesis of research.** It can be assumed that the reception of the culture codes of “Meal”, “Clothes”, “Interpersonal Relations” in the German translations of M. Bulgakov’s works is due to dual subjectivity of world perception, which is reflected in the target text where the reality seems to be represented both through the author’s prism of world view, and is subject to the translator’s reflection on the source meanings. The logic of meaning-shaping in translating culturemes from M. Bulgakov’s works is determined both by the cognitive-discursive features possessed by the translation communication system of subjects, and by the parameters of the sociocultural environment where the source and the target versions function.

**3. Results**

Now let us have a look at some specific features of the reception of the culture code “Meal” in the German translation of the said author’s works. The excerpt below mentions the deficit of quality food, which was to be observed in the Soviet Union, and one product in particular – balyk:


Some emphasis should be placed on another quite interesting social effect of such deficit – the availability of such delicacies exclusively for the privileged layers of the Soviet society, which the French writer А. Gide referred to in his traveler’s notes when offering an account of the same period:

We can see the society getting stratified again, social groups are emerging, if not even classes, and a new type of aristocracy is coming into existence. I am not talking of those who stand out due to their special deeds or personal virtues, yet I am talking about the aristocracy of the always correctly thinking conformists. In the next generation this aristocracy will be well-heeled […]. Revolutionary thinking (and putting it simple – critical mind) is becoming uncomfortable, nobody needs it any more. All it takes now is appeasement, conformism. All they want and demand is approval for everything going on in the USSR (2009, p. 32–33, own translation).

The text above shows that belonging to the privileged Soviet circles was associated, first of all, with loyalty to the existing power and its active glorification, including among those involved in artistic field. Following a long-standing tradition, the upper-class intellectuals that were closer to the Soviet power used to enjoy the privilege to buy foods that were beyond commoners’ access. B. Pasternak, in particular, wrote in his novel “Doctor Zhivago”:

About that time Alexander Alexandrovich was asked several times to act as consultant to the Higher Economic Council, and Yurii Andreievich to treat a member of the government who was dangerously ill. Both were paid in what was then the highest currency – credit slips for an allotment of articles from the first of the newly opened distribution centers (1958, p. 135).

Those involved in art, M. Bulgakov wrote, writers and architects, were among the first ones to get access to the scarce delicacies. In return, they were supposed to follow the pro-Soviet political path in their literary creative activities. This conclusion can be also verified by the quotation from “The Master and Margarita” here below, where the writer mocks the fact that Soviet writers of the right ideological orientation lived like pineapples in greenhouses:

“Turn your attention, my friend to this house. It’s nice to think that, hidden under that roof, a whole host of talents is ripening”.

“Like pineapples in hothouses,” said Behemoth (Bulgakov, 2012, p. 359).

Can you imagine what a clamour there’ll be when one of them, for a start, presents the reading public with *The Government Inspector* or, at the very worst, *Eugene Onegin*!”

“Very easily,” Behemoth confirmed once again. “Yes,” Korovyev continued, and raised a finger anxiously, “but! But I say, and I repeat it – but! Only if some micro-
organism or other doesn’t attack these tender hothouse plants, doesn’t eat it their roots, if they don’t begin to rot! And that can happen with pineapples! Dear, oh dear, can’t it just happen!” (Bulgakov, 2012, p. 359).

The last sentence of this passage stresses that the writers did not benefit from such status as it killed their talent. However, let us get back to the above-mentioned part about balyk, which the smart go-getter restaurant administrator was lucky to snatch at the architects’ congress. We believe that this is a case of communicatively adequate reception of his semiotic connotations that is related to the described earlier status that writers enjoyed in the USSR, demonstrated by the two German translators who chose to employ ironical and stylistically lowered equivalents of the Russian cultureme “snatched from the architects’ congress”: “vom Architektenkongreß abgezweigt” (T. Reschke) and “habe ich einem Architektenkongreß entrissen” (E. Boerner). As for translation of cultureme “balyk”, which nominates a traditional Russian delicacy of salted and dried soft parts of sturgeon fish, both German translators convey it in a descriptive way. T. Reschke’s equivalent (“Störrücken”) is completely communicatively adequate, while E. Boerner’s rendering (“ein besonderes Rückenfilet”) is not precise to full extent as it eliminates the denotative sense which conveys that the delicacy is produced from dainty sturgeon fish.

Next we shall have a look at an excerpt by M. Bulgakov telling about a typical feature of the Soviet life – drinking Port Wine. Port Wine is known to wine enthusiasts all over the world. Port Wine is a special Portuguese fortified wine produced in a limited area. Legally it can be produced only in Portugal. However, it was also made in the USSR, and even the name was the same. Soviet winemakers must have just intuitively hit the right balance: cheap–available–strong. This made the beverage attractive for basically all the parts of the society. It was typically bought a-bottle-for-three and then consumed somewhere in the “right” place, which could be a backstreet, a kindergarten yard, a bench. Unlike its European counterpart, the Soviet Port Wine was of low quality, which was mentioned by A. Horoshhevskij:

Of all drugs only Port Wine was legal in the USSR. It was available at any shop. However, the government would deliberately add some flavors, which made it impossible to drink more than 3, or, at maximum, 5 bottles. This is why there was no overdosing in the USSR (2009, p. 222, own translation).

The excerpt above makes it obvious why in the following passage from “The Master and Margarita” the writer says that cutting Port Wine consumption and substituting it with vodka would make people healthy:


M. Bulgakov’s story “The Moonshine Lake” (Samogonnoe ozero) offers the following:

Zatem pomog zhene odet’sja, zaper dver’ na kljuch i zamok, popr os il Dusju pervuju (ne p’et nichego, krome portvejna) smotreť, chtoby zamok nikto ne lomal (Bulgakov, 1995b, p. 319). – Sodann half ich meiner Frau in die Sachen, schloß die Tür zu, hängte das Vorhängeschloß vor, bat Duska Nummer eins (die trinkt nichts außer Portwein) aufzupassen, daß niemand das Schloß aufbreche (Bulgakov, 1979a, p. 175).

Reading the German translation leaves unclear what, actually, the fact of the woman's drinking nothing but Port Wine, meant, i.e. after one read this passage in German it still remained open to guesses whether the woman in question was a well-to-do one who could afford exclusive alcohol or, on the contrary, she was an asocial type who would always consume cheap beverage. Only knowing the semantic meaning of this beverage as a special culture code typical of the Soviet society may help clear up the situation and understand that the text by M. Bulgakov refers to someone who is on the bottom of the society. This fact was never mentioned within the reception of the German translations. It seems reasonable to provide a footnote containing some linguocultural information regarding Port Wine drinking in the USSR and the respective connotations related to it, yet the translators failed to do so, which impedes the communicative equivalence in terms of delivering the meaning of the source text.

Now we shall move to the analysis of the culture code of “Clothes” and its reception in the German translations of Bulgakov’s works. A typical feature of an intellectual in the 1920s – 30s of the XX Century was a coat made of some cheap type of sack-cloth and drape. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language (Tolkovyj slovar’ russkogo jazyka) by D. Ushakov offers the following description of this type of cloth:

**Sack-cloth:** 1. The toughest type of cloth made of thick low-quality yarn (dialect.). 2. Poor-quality tough cloth, outfit (informal, derogatory) (Ushakov, 1935, p. 695, own translation).

Besides, the Russian language has the common expression “drap-derjuga, tri kopejki kilometr” used to denote some
cheap cloth that is used as fake expensive drape cloth. The story “Forty times Forty” (Sorok Sorokov) contains the following lines:


Telling about his own life in the post-revolution Moscow the writer stresses here his own ambivalent social status: Vse burzhui zaperlis’ na dvernye cepochk i i cherez shhel’ vysovyvali lipovye mandaty i udostoverenija […] K gerojam nechego bylo i idi. Geroi byli sami goly, kak sokoly […] Ja okazalsja kak raz nosredne obeih grup (Bulgak, 1995c, p. 234). – Die Burshuis verschanzten sich hinter ihren Türketten und reichten durch den Spalt gefälschte Ausweise und Bescheinigungen heraus […]. Die Helden aufzusuchen hatte auch keinen Sinn. Sie waren selber nackt und bloß wie Falken […] Ich stand genau zwischen diesen beiden Gruppen (Bulgakov, 1979b, p. 183 – 184).

Thus M. Bulgakov stood on an intermediate social level between the bourgeois and the proletarians as his clothes had a mark of this – he was wearing an overcoat, which at the time described was no longer a garment typical of the upper class alone, and which M. Bulgakov mentioned in his work “The Heart of a Dog”: “The nearer he came the more clearly was this to be seen: a gentleman. You think I judge by the coat? Nonsense. Many people, even from the proletariat, wear overcoats nowadays” (1990, p. 265). Indeed, overcoats then was a piece of outdoor clothes for general public yet that type of overcoat was different from the one preferred by well-to-do people. Those coats were made of cheap cloth, e.g. of sack-cloth drape, which was exactly the type of cloth that M. Bulgakov mentioned in the passage above. Thus, the sack-cloth drape was a kind of status symbol of the author and not just description of torn out cloth interpreted by the translator who employed the equivalent “in dem plunrigen Drap” that is deprived of proper communicative adequacy.

The culture code of “Interpersonal relations” is, along with the codes of “Meal” and “Clothes” an important feature for any linguocultural community. Here below we are going to see how it is represented in works by M. Bulgakov and their translations into German based on the analysis of the cultureme “Foreign currency trade in the USSR”. The story “Forty times Forty” (Sorok Sorokov) contains the following description of a scene:


A similar social phenomenon could be found described on the pages of “The Master and Margarita”:


Illegal currency trade was a grave crime, of which Bulgakov’s characters were also aware. They were even ready to confess to less serious crimes just to avoid being accused of currency trade: “I took bribes! I did, but I took them in our Soviet money! I gave out registrations for money, I don’t argue, it happened” (Bulgakov, 2012, p. 161). T. Reschke in his translation of “Forty times Forty” (Sorok Sorokov) offers the best rendering of foreign currency trade coloring in the USSR employing the lexeme “Devisenschieber” that has an informal touch of the component – schieber; yet such connotations are lost in both translations of “The Master and Margarita”.

A typical point about the Soviet mentality of Bulgakov’s times was an ambiguous attitude towards foreigners. On the one hand, Soviet people experienced some fear and suspicion because from the Bolshevik view most foreigners were potential spies, which can be seen from the typical quotes to be found in the printed media of those times:
The hidden war that the masked enemy wages on the Soviet country never stopped for a day. The capitalist countries are getting prepared for a new war against the country of Soviets. For this purpose they send here spies and saboteurs (Ostryj, 1937, p. 2, own translation).

However, foreigners at the same time were seen as symbols of luxury life:


In the language this ambiguity in relation to foreigners was manifested in the cultureme “intourist”. “The Master and Margarita”, for instance, contains the following passage:


The translation by T. Reschke contains the equivalent “Tourist”, which runs completely contrary to M. Bulgakov’s intentions and the source’s linguocultural connotations because the target text does not make it clear why tourists / travelers stir such hatred in the character. E. Boerner uses the transcription of the Russian cultureme, which is more communicatively correct in terms of explicating Soviet cultural connotations in the target language.

4. Conclusion

Drawing a conclusion to the study of the reception of the culture codes in German translations of works by M. Bulgakov mention should be made that their communicatively adequate (i.e. not running contrary to the source text author’s intentions) comprehension and expression in the target language can be performed in case there is a favorable combination of the objective and the subjective factors in place. The objective factors include cultural asymmetry of the semiotic culture codes connected with the epistemological context of the period where the source text was created, as well as the determination of the semantics and the pragmatics of these codes with specific axiological features pertaining to the translation communicative situation, which vary depending on the society and, therefore, may reveal significant differences in various ethnic-cultural mentalities. The subjective factor determining the potential for communicatively adequate reproduction of the source codes from M. Bulgakov’s works in their German translation includes the features lying within the translator’s linguistic persona, namely his or her ability to perceive the author’s intentions, which determine the semiotic meaning of the phenomena under investigation within this study.

The study presented here stands proof to the fact that the German translators were mostly able to conduct adequate decoding of the semiotic culture codes and to find their respective equivalents in the target language and culture while translating M. Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita” as well as his short stories. The semiotic culture codes that were typical of the Soviet mentality in the 1930s get explication in the German translations both through lexical equivalents and through employing semantic translation transformations and pragmatic adaptation in relation to the culture of the target language.

The potential for further studies of culture codes in the Russian classical literature, M. Bulgakov’s works in particular, and their translations into European languages is related to investigating the specificity of their reception in view of ethnic, age, gender, etc., features of those involved in respective translations done through different times. This study has shown that semiotic analysis, which can be applied to culturemes used by the author to produce the intended pragmatic effect, may be employed as a method for scientific investigation of translation adequacy as regards other stylistic devices and means of expressiveness in literary texts.

References
