How to raise cultural awareness through teaching translation

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Abstract

As a dual act of communication which presupposes the existence of two distinct codes, the source language and the target language, translation reflects the relation between these two codes depending on their respective linguistic and cultural identities. An important requirement for teaching translation becomes, thus, raising the cultural awareness of the translation students. A contrastive approach to the study of languages is proposed here as a first step towards cultural awareness. The paper looks into the translation of a corpus of European institutional texts from English into Romanian with a view to assessing the ethnocentric behavior of the two languages/cultures.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, forma mentis, translation, referential/vernacular language.

1. Introduction

The Romanian linguist Pușcariu defines language in terms of national character. He says: “Language is not – and this is a fact more and more people admit – only a servant of thought but also a master of it. If it is true that man speaks the way he thinks, it is also true that man thinks the way his forebears used to speak. In our native language we look for the best suited phrases to embody our thoughts but this inherited language with its clichés and recurrent associations drive our thoughts into the paths beaten by our ancestors’ minds, relating us to each other as sons of the same nation, in a national forma mentis.” (Pușcariu 1940, p.10, original emphasis, our translation).

Language as forma mentis which reminds us of but does not however identify with the humboldtian concept of language as Weltanschaung could be a premise for any contrastive approach to language studies in general and to translation-oriented studies in particular. Actually contrastive studies of languages seem to be primarily motivated by translation. Since it is in translation that languages confront each other and their relevant characters/cultural identities/formae mentis become manifest.

2. English and Romanian: two formae mentis

English and Romanian are apparently very different in character. The relatively great difference between the two languages is accounted for by their very origins, Germanic and Latin respectively. Obviously, not all differences

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between the two languages are meaningful if put into a translation perspective, i.e. if considered as sources of translation problems.

At the level of vocabulary it is not the area of Germanic words which poses most translation problems. In translation it is, on the contrary, and rather surprisingly, the area of Romanic vocabulary. This area is tremendously vast, covering more than half of all English words.

Out of the large amount of English words of Romanic origin relatively many share the meaning of the formally resembling – in pronunciation or in spelling – Romanian equivalents, e.g. *absolute, absurd, admire, animal, define, difficulty, dilemma, example* etc.

Many cognates are, however, partly or fully deceptive, “false friends” – as they are usually called. The fully deceptive have completely different meanings, e.g. *absolvent (E) - persoană care iartă (Ro); advertisement (E) – reclamă (Ro); confident (E) – încrezător (Ro); consistent (E) – consecvent (Ro); deception (E) – îngelăciune (Ro).*

The meaning of the partly deceptive overlap, which makes these cognates the most treacherous to translators, e.g.: *(E) act – (Ro) act/dătă/acţiune, act/lege/document, act (al unei piese de teatru); (E) argument – (Ro) ceară/discuţie, argument; (E) assist – (Ro) a ajuta/a da o mâna de ajutor, a asista/a lua parte; (E) consumption – (Ro) consum, tuberculoză; (E) date – (Ro) dată (calendaristică), întâlnire (rendeze-vous); (E) decent – (Ro) acceptabil/destul de bun, decent; (E) evidence – (Ro) probe/mărturii/dovezi, evidenţă; (E) sober – (Ro) trez/credenţa;* 

A translation-oriented contrastive analysis called *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais* by the Canadian linguists J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet (1993) demonstrates that there is no perfect interlingual synonymy, not even in the area of words having the same origin. In terms of lexical contrast Vinay and Darbelnet point out that while French has a tendency to favour the *intellectual* side of reality (*le plan de l’entendement*) in expressing meaning, English, on the contrary, is inclined towards the *emotional* one (*le plan du réel*). To express the same meaning French will choose *sign words* (*mots signes*), which speak to the mind while English will prefer *image words* (*mots images*) speaking to the senses. This contrast can also be identified when comparing Romanian to English since Romanian resembles French in character more than it resembles English. Therefore the example Vinay and Darbelnet (1993, p.8) give to illustrate the French – English contrast can also be used to highlight the difference between Romanian and English. Thus the English equivalent of the French: “un oiseau *est entré dans la pièce*” is “a bird *flew into the room*”. The Romanian equivalent will obviously be the literal translation of the French one, i.e. “*o pasăre a intrat în camera*”, the sign-word *a intra* being preferred to the image-word, *a zbura*.

This semantic feature of the English vocabulary accounts for the change in the meaning of cognates. Many cognates had originally similar meanings which developed further on following different semantic patterns. Such patterns can be identified by comparing word definitions given by various editions of English monolingual dictionaries. Thus, for instance, the first meaning of the word *argument* given by the 1963 edition of the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English is: *arguing reasoning* while the first meaning of the same word given by the 1995 edition of the same dictionary is: *disagreement*, especially an angry one; *a quarrel*. Likewise, the first meaning of the word *sober* given by the 1963 edition of the dictionary mentioned above is: *self-controlled, temperate, serious in thought* while the first meaning of the same word in the 1995 edition is: *not affected by alcohol, not drunk*. The semantic shift from conceptual to emotional is evident.

The preference of English for *image words* accounts for the expressiveness English displays even in informative texts, a category which is, by definition, stylistically neutral, purely denotative, deprived of any emotional semantic feature. The unintentional/natural expressiveness of English in such texts is an effect of *image words* and *image phrases* or metaphorical expressions. Thus, an uninspired translator who would render such words or phrases literally or by equally expressive equivalents in Romanian might shock a Romanian reader used to attach the informative function to a stylistically neutral expression.

The following selection of English informative text samples is meant to illustrate how to *modulate* semantic meaning so as to create equivalents that fit the Romanian pattern of informative expression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Romanian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Inflation has sometimes been described as an increasing amount of money chasing a shrinking number of goods”</td>
<td>„Inflația este uneori caracterizată drept o creștere accentuată a puterii de cumpărăre asociată cu o scădere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“(…) those who are on fixed pensions (...) are hurt by inflation, while those who make the payments required in those contracts come out ahead.” (ibidem, p. 9).

“Nations require savings and a pool of loanable funds to invest in more capital resources.” (ibidem, p. 9).

“As the winds of competition begin to blow through the economy, they force inefficient businesses to close (...)” (ibidem, p. 17)

“But with the pain of unemployment come the benefits of free prices.” (ibidem, p. 17)

At the level of grammatical meaning translation problems arise from the differences in grammatical categories. There are grammatical categories which exist in one language and do not exist in another language. The English progressive aspects of verbs, for instance, is not to be found in Romanian; declension, on the other hand, exists in Romanian and is not to be found in English. This does not mean that the grammatical meaning expressed by the progressive aspect cannot be rendered from English into Romanian or that the one connected with declension in Romanian cannot be rendered into English. “If a certain grammatical category does not exist in a certain language its meaning can be rendered in this language by lexical means”, says Jakobson (1963, p.82, our translation).

In the area of grammatical meaning, Vinay and Darbelnet (1993, p.130) point out that while English describes the word as a process which accounts for its verbal character, French focuses on result, preferring nominal structures. Romanian obviously follows the French pattern and therefore when one translates from English to Romanian one very often has to transpose verbs/verbal structures to nouns/nominal structures. The translation samples given bellow illustrate this grammatical contrast:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Romanian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“When the colonies that eventually became the United States of America were settled…” (Higher Education, The United States Information Agency, 1991).</td>
<td>„Odată cu înființarea coloniilor care au devenit mai pe urmă Statele Unite ale Americii…” (our translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The National Institute of Education, a governemnt agency reports that…” (ibidem).</td>
<td>“Conform unui raport al Institutului Național pentru Educație, o organizație guvernamentală…” (our translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But some observers believe this trend…” (ibidem).</td>
<td>“Totuși, în opinia unor analiști această tendință…” (our translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Credits are earned by attending lectures.” (ibidem).</td>
<td>“Obținerea creditelor este condiționată de participarea la cursuri.” (our translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Why do the large universities flourish?” (ibidem).</td>
<td>“Cum se explică creșterea impetuosă a înflorirea marilor universități ?” (our translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In its report, the NIE concluded that…” (ibidem).</td>
<td>“Concluziile raportului Institutului Național pentru Educație…” (our translation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Languages/Cultures in contest

Some translation theorists (Berman, 1984, 1990) suggest that languages in translation may turn into languages in contest. Such theorists argue that translation, as a dual act of communication which presupposes the existence of two distinct codes, the source language and the target language, reflects the relation between these two codes, depending on their respective linguistic and cultural identities. This relation generally appears as a contest, a real fight for imposing or/and preserving cultural identity.
Throughout history, as Brisset points out, translation has basically been oriented to the mother tongue, the native language since its “goal is to supplant such foreign forms of expression, which are viewed as alienating, literally dispossessing (…) to replace the language of the other by a native language (…). Translation becomes an act of reclaiming of recentering of the identity, a reterritorializing operation.” (in Venuti (ed.), 2000, p. 345). Brisset suggests that translation is “naturally” oriented towards mother tongue. A less “natural” orientation appears thus to be that which favors the source language. The former type of translation is called communicative/instrumental/covert/centered or ethnocentric depending on the translation theory which describes it. The latter is similarly referred to as semantic/documentary/overt/decentered. Translation theories have identified criteria for choosing a particular type/method of translation.

The linguistic approach argues that the translating method is somewhat inherent in the text function which may be expressive, informative and persuasive. On the assumption that the function of the source text should be preserved in the target text, semantic translation is proposed for expressive texts and communicative for informative and vocative texts (Newmark, 1988, p. 47).

The skopos theory (Vermeer in Venuti (ed.), 2000) claims the translator’s freedom to choose the method according to the translation purpose. The translator can decide to completely change the function of the source language text accomplishing thus an instrumental/covert translation or he may choose to be faithful to the source language text and achieve, thus, a documentary/overt translation what linguists call semantic or, more generally, faithful.

Although the faithful translation is included in the translator’s range of choices, being one of several valid translation options, the skopos theory is basically oriented towards the target language text. In this respect Vermeer even speaks of a “dethronement” of the source text (cf. Vermeer, 2000).

In strictly linguistic terms the semantic or faithful translation is achieved through such procedures as: transference (loan words), through translation or calque (loan collocations), transpositions or shifts. Although very “close” to the source language, the faithful translation does not alter the grammatical structure of the target language. This cannot be said about literal translation, an extreme case of faithfulness in which the very structure of the target language gets blown up.

Communicative translation is mainly achieved through modulation, equivalence, adaptation. All these procedures involve substantial lexical and structural alterations of, this time, the source language.

4. Teaching translation

Teaching translation becomes, in the light of what we have discussed so far, a matter of teaching languages in contest, in other words, raising linguistic and cultural awareness. Linguistic is seen here as part of cultural since language is presupposed to be a component or basic feature of culture.

Cultural awareness is meant to account for the adequate method of translation. When a translator opts for a particular type of translation he/she expresses a definite preference for one of the two languages/cultures in contest. This is implied but not, however, accepted as such by translation theorists. They shift focus on the translator’s reasons for favoring one language or the other and they are quite right to do so since translation is not taking place in a vacuum but in a real setting, for a real readership, with a real purpose.

The trained translator will choose how to translate according to all these factors and/or observing the provisions of a Commission agreed upon with a Client, as described by Vermeer (2000, p. 229). Translation thus becomes an intentional process initiated by someone fully aware of the adequacy of the chosen method. This might be called professional awareness and this should be complemented by cultural awareness. When favouring one of the two languages/cultures in contest, the translator should also be fully aware of the cultural consequences of this act.

History shows that such consequences might be “dramatic” e.g. the ethnocentric translation of the Bible brought about - as Brisset points out (2000) - the creation of French and German in the XVIth century, elevating vernacular, at the time, German and French languages to the status of referential, cultural languages. This same type of translation is considered an utter alienation by Meschonnic (1973). He deplores the ethnocentric way of translating the Old Testament from Hebrew - a language governed by paratax – into Greek and Latin – languages governed by
He argues that this translation infused Christian spirit into the Hebrew writings by the mere procedure of transposition which resulted in paratax being turned into syntax.

A negative cultural consequence of the opposite, i.e. faithful type of translation shall be discussed further on.

### 5. Translation Commission and cultural awareness

Scrutinizing the translation of a corpus of European institutional texts – (http://www.anpcdefp.ro/misiune/index.html, 2008; http://www.anpcdefp.ro/programe/llp/comenius/index.html, 2008; http://www.anpcdefp.ro/programe/llp/erasmus/index.html, 2008; http://www.anpcdefp.ro/programe/llp/leonardo/index.html, 2008; http://www.anpcdefp.ro/programe/llp/monnet/index.html, 2008) including educational programs, calls for proposals, instructions, application forms, etc. issued by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – commissioned by the Romanian organization Agenția Națională pentru Programe Comunitare în Domeniul Educației și Formării Profesionale, we found out that the translation type chosen by the translator/s was the faithful one. All those texts were translated faithfully and many of them even literally.

This choice is rather surprising and seems to contradict all translation theories which would have strongly recommended a plainly communicative translation for this type of pragmatic, informative texts.

Some examples of such faithful translations are given below. They are divided into two registers: lexical and grammatical / syntactic and they also include the communicative variant which is our translation. In brackets, we also mention the variety/degree of faithfulness each translation displays.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>English</strong></th>
<th><strong>Romanian – faithful translation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Romanian – communicative translation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexical</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grants</td>
<td>granturi (borrowing or calque)</td>
<td>burse/subvenții/subsidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobilities</td>
<td>mobilități (borrowing or calque)</td>
<td>burs / stagi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>educație (borrowing of meaning)</td>
<td>învățământ/educație</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apply/application</td>
<td>aplica / aplicație (borrowing or calque)</td>
<td>candida / candidatură</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applicants</td>
<td>aplicați (transference)</td>
<td>facilatii/ocazii/șanse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opportunities</td>
<td>oportunități (borrowing of meaning)</td>
<td>plan de învățământ/program de studiu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curriculum</td>
<td>curricularum (transference)</td>
<td>conform planului de învățământ/programului de studii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curricular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syllabus</td>
<td>silabus (transference)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammatical / Syntactic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social inclusion</td>
<td>incluziune socială (calque)</td>
<td>integrare socială</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active citizenship</td>
<td>cetățenie activă (calque)</td>
<td>activism social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call for proposals</td>
<td>apel pentru propuneri (literal translation)</td>
<td>lansare de proiect / invitație de participare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural education</td>
<td>educație interculturală (literal translation)</td>
<td>formare în spirit intercultural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The translations we studied can be described as **faithful**. They are mere **transpositions** of the original texts, based on an excessive use of calques or loans/borrowings, a procedure suggestively called **through-translation** by Newmark (1988, p.84).

The proper handling of transposition in these translations account for the “production of the appropriate sense”, if we are to paraphrase Newmark (1988, p.285) and saves translation from falling into translationese although the excessive use of loans often leads to confusion.

In order to understand the translator’s reasons for choosing to be faithful to the source text one has to look into the **skopos** and **commission** of this translation.

As we have suggested a purely informative text would have called for a communicative translation. It is important to note that the source text is not actually an “innocent” informative text. This is an **institutional** text
which means that, in addition to factual information it conveys authority, set values, principles and conventions – in this case, the European educational standards and requirements – in other words, ideology/culture.

The translator could have ignored the authoritative character of the source text if the translator had not had to follow a Commissioner’s instructions. The Commissioner was, as we have already mentioned, Agenția Națională pentru Programe Comunitare în Domeniul Educației și Formării Profesionale, a Romanian organization created to implement European educational policies. Negotiated or not – Vermeer (2000, p.231) describes the translation commission as a contract which may be negotiated – the requirement of an “as faithful as possible translation” exists in this translation commission. Evidence for that is provided by a brief note attached to the Romanian version, saying that „Versiunea în limba engleză a apelului prevalează oricând asupra versiunii în limba română sau în orice altă limbă a apelului general la propuneri de proiecte în anul 2009.” (“The English version of the Call for proposals 2009 will at all times prevail over the Romanian or any other version” – our translation). This explicitly points to authority.

6. Conclusion

What we have discussed here is a case, among many, of what can be called “ideologized” translation. Although justifiable, this translation is not fairly acceptable since it creates a “corrupted” target language, a stereotyped, unnatural, lexically and grammatically abused idiom.

Credited with the authority of the European institutional discourse, this language spreads fast and, in time, may affect the referential identity of the Romanian language, turning it into a vernacular idiom, a tongue among other European tongues. This is perhaps what the title of a booklet issued by the European Commission suggests, i.e. Europe, One language, several tongues. Will this one language be English?

References