

The concept of linguistic *cultureme* in Translation Studies

Mața Țaran Andreici*

Abstract: The *cultureme* is a concept that could encapsulate the great subtlety of traductology-related issues. A complex concept, the *cultureme* stems from the variety of phenomena and realities it designates. It features in the metalanguage of translation theorists and translators, derived from the need to reconsider, from the perspective of translation theories, certain aspects traditionally researched and studied by linguistics (such as connotations, semantic fields, etc.) in order to shape the critical apparatus appropriate to this process. Since they refer to an extra-linguistic context, to a situation, *culturemes* can be historical, cultural, literary, etc. The stake of this article is to demonstrate the existence and functioning of the linguistic *culturemes*, illustrated in the paper, with examples from grammatical categories specific to the Slavonic languages.

Keywords: ethno-linguistics, linguistic culturemes, specific grammatical categories.

1. Introduction

1.1. Cultureme: definition

The *cultureme* is a new term in the field of ethno-linguistics, which Croatian researchers (Pišković 2012) took from the works of some German and Polish authors (Oksaar 1988; Nagórko 2004). Originally used in German theories of cultural transfer, the concept of *cultureme* is made up of *Kultur* and its suffix *-em*. German researchers have given it considerable attention, proportionate to his importance in the process of communication through translation. The *cultureme* was created, analysed and promoted by Els Oksaar in his reference study on cultural transfer and interculturality called *Kulturremtheorie. Ein Beitrag ...* (1988). According to Els Oksaar, *cultureme* is an abstract unit that allows for the representation of a social

* Lecturer, PhD, Department of Slavic Languages, Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, West University of Timișoara, Romania. E-mail: mtaran75@yahoo.com

interaction (the equivalent empirical term is *behavioreme*), in which words are accompanied by nonverbal signs: gesture, mimics. Anne Wierzbicka (1999), who taught in Warsaw and at the University of Canberra, does not consider it necessary to search for new terms for the units in the field that she defines as *ethnosemantics*, *ethnopragmatics*, or even *ethnosyntax*.

Similar to linguistics, which operates with basic units (phoneme, morpheme, phrase, etc.), traductology creates its own metalanguage, necessary for shaping the critical apparatus used in the evaluation of translation. The term *cultureme* is created following the pattern of other linguistic units such as *phoneme*, *morpheme*, *phraseme*, *semanteme*, *lexeme*, and is included in ethnolinguistic research due to its orientation towards culture. Therefore, the *cultureme* refers to statements bearing cultural information, cultural units, culturally marked words. Through these terms, the *kultur* (eme) resulted by analogy. Alicja Nagórko believes that it would be much better to accept the term proposed by Oksaar - *behavioreme*, given that culture is a dynamic phenomenon that is done through deeds and *behaviors* (in relation to Engl. *to behave*).

According to the theory of *culturemes* promoted by Els Oksaar, *culturemes* are abstract units (eg greetings, farewell, etc.) that are done verbally, extra-verbally, nonverbally or paralingually with appropriate *behavioremes*. Most of these *behavioremes* refer to oral interaction between locutors, their applicability in professional communication being reduced. Therefore, *culturemes* exist in written or oral expression.

Through *cultureme*, Evseev (1985: 15-32) and Benkô (1985: 5-14) designate "a unit of cultural information". Evseev complements Benkô's idea of unity of cultural information. In the view of this researcher, the term refers to the result of a cultural act from the moment of its impact with a receiver. Evseev (1985: 16) considers that "the unity of cultural information" "must have the characteristics of a universal sign, detectable in any kind of cultural message" whatever the nature of the language (oral, gestural, plastic, musical). He concludes on the need to use the *cultureme* in the sociology of culture to study integration and optimization of cultural elements in permanent education.

On a linguistic level, *culturemes* are simple or complex words, phrases, syntagmas, sentences, statements, etc.) that reflect social and cultural realities of a community or people, and pose problems of transfer from one language to another. *Culturemes*, whatever their form of manifestation (simple or composite, phraseological unit, allusive palimpsest expression), bear latently a cultural specificity of one of the languages in a translation relationship, in this case characteristic of the source language, a historical and socio-cultural motivation, which does not occur at all, or is partially found but does not have the same cultural value in the target language (Lungu-Badea 2004: 25-68).

Used voluntarily or involuntarily, *culturemes* are sometimes difficult to spot even by recipients belonging to the same linguistic space with the emitters. The relativity and monoculture of a *cultureme* makes it harder to spot. Thus, the harder

they are to spot by translators, the higher the difficulty of equivalence in the target language becomes.

1.2. Classification of *culturemes*

The term *cultureme* or minimal unit bearing cultural information was paid considerable attention in the studies devoted to cultural transfer, interculturality and cultural differences (Oksaar 1988). Despite the existing theoretical studies, the term did not enter dictionaries as an accredited concept, but there are attempts to impose it (Lungu-Badea 2012: 54-57). In our attempt to define and, above all, to integrate the term *cultureme* into the linguistics of the Slavonic languages, we consider appropriate the classification of *culturemes* advanced by Nagórko (2004: 136).

Subtypes of *cultureme*:

- *culturemes* in a narrow sense (the key words of culture, such as *Slavic suffixes*, which create abstract nouns and, often, proper names);
- *cultural scenarios*, referred to in English by the word *scripts*. These are typical language interactions in different social situations, such as compliments, congratulations, wishes, swearwords, hypocorisms;
- *stereotypes* (especially ethnic ones);
- *xenisms* (behaviour as well as linguistic reactions that violate the recognized rules of behaviour in society and betray the participant in the given situation).

2. The *cultureme* in the field of linguistics

Culturemes are understood by Nagórko (2004: 131-143) in two ways: *cultureme* in a narrow sense and cultural scenarios. *Culturemes* in a narrow sense are perceived as key words of culture (exoticisms, proper names, national symbols). The researcher includes specific cultural grammatical categories such as affective suffixes in the sphere of *culturemes* and morphemes. Typical morphemes that fall into the category of *culturemes* in the narrow sense of the word are emotional suffixes whose content has an expressive potential (Cr. *ljudina*, *poštenjačina*, *sestrica*) or negative (Cr. *kretenčina*, *komunjara*, *pijandura*).

Grammatical categories also reflect the linguistic manifestations of cultural behaviour, illustrated in the paper with examples related to the gender category. Therefore, syntactic categories should also be added to the morphological ones, with special functions, which Nagórko mentions. Cultural scenarios regulate typical language interactions in different social situations.

The linguist who regards some linguistic categories as *culturemes* must resort to interdisciplinary methods such as those in theory of literature (analysis of literary themes/motifs, tropes, genres, stereotypes, heroes/characters), ethnology (rituals, linguistic magic/incantations) and social psychology (for example, research into attitudes with the help of the survey).

Another pilot study (Pišković 2012: 61-70) believes that violations of gender logic also fall in the sphere of *culturemes*. In any language with grammatical gender, there is a semantic essence, namely a corpus of pairs of masculine or feminine nouns, which designate beings (Cr. *muškarac – žena, otac – majka, brat – sestra, učitelj – učiteljica, kuhar – kuharica, jelen – košuta, pijetao – kokoš, lisac – lisica*), the meaning of these nouns clearly influencing their grammatical gender. The problem is whether the gender of the nouns that designate things may, however, be determined by meaning. Jakobson (1959: 232-239, apud Pišković 2012: 66) presents the opposite situation; he considers that the grammatical gender can influence linguistic unity, and he brings some examples from Russian. One of these is the metaphor of the days of the week, conveyed with the grammatical gender. In Croatian language, the days of the week *ponedjeljak, utorak, četvrtak, petak* are considered masculine, and *srijeda, subota* - feminine. The fact that *petak*, in other Slavonic languages (for example in Croatian), is masculine, is reflected in the folk traditions and celebrations that take place this day.

Moreover, starting from the characteristics of fork and spoon, the Russians attribute the status of *cultureme* to the spoon. They think a knife / Russ. *нож*, falling on the floor announces a male guest and a fork / Russ. *вилка* – a female guest, as the knife is masculine and the fork is feminine. Popular mythology is the source of the representation of death as a woman in the works of Slavic painters (as the Russian nouns *смерть* and "death" are feminine), while in the works of German painters - as a man (*der Tod*).

To these examples, in the Croatian language, the phenomenon of derivation with masculine affective suffixes may be added, as these are affixed to the base of their proper feminine names (for example *Nada*> *Nadek*, *Nevenka*> *Nenek*, *Marija*> *Marek*, *Ljubica*> *Ljubek*) or (*Anka, Ana*> *Ankač*), the female suffix *-ica* carrying increased affection (*Nadica, Nenica, Marica, Ljubica, Anica*), even if its affective potential almost disappeared in the Kajkavian dialects (Pišković 2012: 68). This may account for the appearance, with this function, of other unexpected masculine suffixes, as its markings are much stronger and really relate to intimate communication.

These examples may be considered violations of gender logic. They require, nevertheless, a more profound psycholinguistic and ethnolinguistic explanation.

3. Conclusion

The *cultureme*, one of the key concepts of the theory of translation, is in a relationship of close dependence with the term culture, from which it also derives. The rather difficult nature of the cultural element, the relativity of its status, as well as the many more or less closely related areas in which it is used, make the *cultureme* a notion whose definitions vary, but converge into associating it with the unit carrying cultural information. Having entered relatively recently in specialized languages (around the 1980s), the word is not recorded in most foreign or general dictionaries.

Although to date many studies have been devoted to it, the term continues to be polyvalent and rather ambiguous, and the classification criteria and its transfer mechanisms from one language to another are still far from achieving the unanimous consent of specialists from the various spheres of activity that operate with the notion of *cultureme*: linguists, translation theorists, sociologists, teachers, IT specialists, etc. Hence the terminological hesitation that we notice in various theoreticians or translation theorists who use either the name of *culturemes* or units carrying cultural information, cultural references, cultural elements or culturally specific units.

Thus, the theoretical research of the phenomenon of *culturemes* requires complex and diverse theoretical debates. The issue of the transfer of *culturemes* is not only to preserve the fidelity of form, but to be true to the content and, above all, to the cultural environment in which meaning is updated. Yet *culturemes* function in a determined culture, their true dimensions being only apparent in a comparative approach. The goal of interculturality is to extract and compare cultural features, or, in other words, *culturemes*. Under these circumstances, the study of *culturemes* requires teamwork, and dictionaries of *culturemes* must also contain elements of history, culture, etc.

References

1. Benkô, O., 'Culturema sau despre iradiațiile mesajului receptat', in *Cultură, model, educație permanentă. Aspecte actuale ale educației permanente*. Timișoara: Tipografia Universității de Vest, 1985, pp. 5-14.
2. Evseev, I., 'Proiectul unei grile valorice a textului lecturat', in *Cultură, model, educație permanentă* (red. Otto Benkô ș. a.). Timișoara: Tipografia Universității de Vest, 1985, pp. 15-32.
3. Lungu-Badea, G., *Mic dicționar de termeni utilizați în teoria, practica și didactica traducerii*. Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2012.
4. Lungu-Badea, G., *Teoria culturemelor; teoria traducerii*. Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2004.
5. Nagórko, A., 'Etnolingvistika i kulturemi u međujezičkom prostoru', in *Rasprave instituta za hrvatski jezik i jezikoslovlje* (30). Zagreb: 2004, pp. 131-143.
6. Oksaar, E., *Kulturemtheorie. Ein Beitrag zur Sprachverwendungsforschung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1988.
7. Pišković, T., 'Hrvatski gramatički rod kao kulturem', in *Fluminensia* (24). Rjeka: 2012, pp. 61-70.
8. Wierzbicka, A., *Język - umysł - kultura*. Warszawa: PWN, 1999.