PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE:
THE TRAINEES' PERSPECTIVE

Mihaela COZMA
University of the West, Timişoara

Abstract: An important element of what is generally referred to as translation competence is represented by the translator's ability to offer an appropriate treatment of the culturally-embedded words, phrases and structures presented by the source text. What are the most effective means by which the translator trainer can help his/her students develop cultural competence? What are the translation trainees' needs with regard to cultural training, and what kind of difficulties do they most frequently encounter from this point of view? The paper will discuss these aspects, taking into account both theoretical and research data.

Keywords: translation competence, cultural embedding, translator training, cultural problems, pragmatic texts

1. Introduction

It is widely admitted now that translation competence involves much more than a very good knowledge of two language codes, since the correct transfer from the source text to the target one must also take into account aspects related to the differences imposed by the actual language use in the two cultures in contact. More specifically, a competent translator is supposed to identify the culture-specific features of the source text and, then, to decide on the best manner of rendering those features into the target language.

Just like any other type of competence, the development of cultural competence needs training and this is an aspect that both translator trainers and translation students should have in mind. Moreover, both future translators and their teachers should also be aware that cultural competence is not at all restricted to literary matters, as the general opinion still stands. Various translation theorists (e.g. Kastberg 2007, Stolze 2009) have started to highlight the fact that translating pragmatic texts involves much more than handling terminology, because, in addition to subject-relevant information, such texts also include some implicit references to the text producer's cultural background. Unfortunately, many translation students simply do not realize that pragmatic texts present a certain degree of cultural embedding and, consequently, the work they produce, although correct from a strictly linguistic point of view, often lacks the adequacy that makes a text functional in the target culture. My paper starts from the problems that translation students might have with identifying and rendering the cultural implications generally presented by pragmatic texts, and also suggests ways in which translator trainers can help them in this respect.

2.   Cultural problems in pragmatic texts: research evidence

My decision to examine the problems encountered by the trainee translators with regard to the cultural embedding of source texts is based on a series of observations that I have made during the last few years: evaluating the work produced by my translation students, I have noticed that it frequently contained various errors that could be generally labelled as "cultural". As I wanted to go deeper into the manifestations of this phenomenon with a view to identifying solutions meant to help my students, I conducted a mini-research study based on the translations performed by my students in the Translation MA programme at our University. More specifically, I analyzed the translated variants of several types of pragmatic texts – from laws and other types of official documents to instruction leaflets and magazine articles – as they were handed in by my students during the last academic year, and I considered the treatment offered by them to the various cultural features present in the source texts. I would like to mention that the translations making up my corpus were produced at different points of the academic year as part of the process of formative evaluation, and the student translators had not been specifically made aware of the cultural elements that the texts might contain.

2.1. Text translations: Results

My analysis has led to the identification of the following categories of cultural problems, that is problems which are not caused by the translators' lack of language knowledge, but by their insufficient familiarity with the context in which certain linguistic forms are normally used.

2.1.1.   Background cultural knowledge

Some knowledge regarding geographical, organizational and historical aspects of the source culture is always necessary, because the text to be translated is very likely to contain words and expressions related to them and the translator is supposed to render them appropriately in the target text.

An interesting example is that of "the City of London", which, in fact, does not refer to the capital city, but to the financial centre of London, often referred to as "the City". This concept, which is quite difficult to translate without the necessary background knowledge, was rendered by most of my students as "Londra" ("London"), "oraşul Londra" ("the town of London"), "metropola Londrei" ("the metropolis of London") or even "primăria Londrei" ("London town hall"). Those few students who offered a translation solution like "centrul financiar al Londrei" ("the financial centre of London") were certainly in line with the message of the original text.

Another example of this type is represented by "North Yorkshire county", which was frequently translated as "districtul North Yorkshire" or even "judeţul North Yorkshire", and not as "comitatul North Yorkshire", which is the Romanian term used with reference to the Anglo-Saxon space and which, consequently, would have been

the appropriate translation solution. In this way, the future translators proved to have insufficient knowledge regarding Great Britain's territorial divisions.

2.1.2. Institutional differences

Due to the differences between the legal systems of Great Britain and Romania, the terms "solicitors and barristers" raised problems of translation. Some students suggested the variant "avocaţii şi procurorii" ("lawyers and prosecutors"), while others resorted to the solution "solicitanţii şi avocaţii pledanţi" ("petitioners and barristers"). However, I also identified some correct translation variants, such as "avocaţii pledanţi şi cei consultanţi" ("barristers and solicitors"), which actually uses the only term available in Romanian for this profession plus a descriptive element meant to mark the difference between the two categories, or simply "avocaţii" ("lawyers"), which omits the distinction made in the source text and renders the global meaning of the expression.

Institutional differences between the two cultures in contact are also accountable for the problems created by the translation of the term "QC(s)", which is an abbreviation of "Queen's Counsel", and refers to a barrister or an advocate appointed Counsel to the Crown on the recommendation of the Lord Chancellor. Among the translation solutions identified by my students, there were "juriştii din Consiliul Reginei" ("the lawyers in the Queen's Council"), "clasa de sus" ("the upper class") or "cei ce aparţin QC" ("those who belong to QC"). An appropriate variant in this case – "consilieri ai Reginei" - was oferred only by two or three of my subjects.

2.1.3. Conceptualization of reality

The expression "I only got a B plus in Biology" was rendered by some subjects literally as "Am luat doar un B la biologie", which would be meaningless for a Romanian reader. Here, the problem is that the British and the Romanian systems of education use different concepts for assessing the students' performance: if, in the United Kingdom, grades are expressed in letters (A-E) and percentages (0%- 100%), in Romania, the grading system is from 1 to 10. Consequently, translation solutions such as "Am luat doar un 8 la biologie" sau "Am primit doar nota 9 la biologie", as suggested by some students, are certainly more adequate to the intended audience.

Measurements are also a problem; for example, the phrase "three miles" was translated by some of my subjects as "trei mile" or even "trei kilometri" ("three kilometers"), a variant which clearly represents a mistake. Since the measurement systems in the two cultures are very different, translators are supposed to use the corresponding accepted target language equivalent, in this particular case, something like "aproximativ cinci kilometri" ("approximately five kilometers").

2.1.4. Terminology of the field

For all the field-specific lexical items contained by the texts to be translated, the translator must identify the officially accepted equivalents in the target language, the ability to find and use any type of specialist terminology representing an important constituent element of the translation competence. The analysis of the texts in my corpus revealed that even fields which are quite familiar to the general public (for

example, education), may create problems. For example, "vocational training" was rendered by some of my subjects literally as "pregătire vocaţională" or "îndrumare profesională". However, the exact equivalent of this term, i.e. "formare profesională", was also present in some of the translations that I analyzed. It is obvious that in the case of the texts regarding domains with which people do not have very much personal or media contact, the translator's understanding and producing a correct equivalent are likely to be more problematic. In my corpus of texts, such cases appeared especially in relation to terms from the field of construction: for example, "structural joints" was generally rendered by means of phrases like "racorduri structurale" ("structural connections") or "noduri structurale" ("structural knots"), and not by means of the established Romanian equivalent "rosturi de construcţie".

Solid knowledge of the specialized field terminology is also necessary for the correct translation of the phrase "Council of the European Union", which denotes the institution in the legislature of the European Union representing the governments of member states. I was glad to discover that most of my students rendered this phrase correctly as "consiliul Uniunii Europene". However, there were also cases when my subjects made a mistake that is typical in the case of this phrase: they rendered it either as "Consiliul European" or as "Consiliul Europei", thus creating confusion with other organizations and institutions, and, consequently, affecting the intended message of the text.

2.1.5.   Genre conventions

In the case of the legal texts, mandatory "shall", which is the norm for expressing the obligatory character of the legal provision in English, was rendered by many of the subjects simply as a marker of the Future tense. Thus, a verb like "shall determine" (cf. "The administrative rules and legal obligations shall determine the minimum period for which a document must be kept.") was often translated as "vor determina" ("will determine") or "vor stabili" ("will establish"), solutions which disregard the Romanian norm for the verbs in the legal provisions, that is the Present tense of the Indicative mood. There were even some cases in which the students understood the obligatory character of the English verbal phrase, but still chose inappropriate translation solutions, such as "trebuie să stabilească" ("must establish") or "ar trebui să determine" ("should determine"), simply because they were not aware that Romanian has other norms in this respect.

The norms that the target language has for a particular text type were also flouted in the case of medicine instruction leaflets, where most of my students rendered English Imperatives such as "apply (a thin film of Contractubex Gel)" or "rub (the gel)" by means of Romanian verbs of the same grammatical category, ignoring the fact that, in their native language, the verbs used in such situations are in the Present tense, the reflexive voice with a passive meaning.

There are two important aspects that I would like to highlight in relation to the presentation of cultural problems discussed in this section.

Firstly, I do not at all claim that this presentation is exhaustive: it is only based on my personal experience as a trainer and it is characteristic of certain types of pragmatic texts, namely legal texts, instruction leaflets, technical texts and magazine articles.

Secondly, most of the problems that I have illustrated are not necessarily a result of the fact that the translators may not have a good knowledge of the target and/or of the source language, but, rather, of their lack of awareness that, beyond the linguistic forms, there is a situational and cultural aspect that also needs attention. This lack of awareness was also indicated by the findings of a second research study that I conducted on the topic of cultural competence. More specifically, after I analyzed the students' treatment of cultural elements and I arrived at the conclusions presented above, I gave my students a questionnaire (cf. Annex) basically focused on their previous training in cultural elements of translation, as well as on their perception of the nature of cultural competence and the needs that they have from this point of view. The most important findings of this study are briefly presented below.

2.2. Questionnaire: Results

Just as I expected, my subjects confessed either that they had not had any training in cultural aspects so far or that the only training of this kind had been provided under the form of some general courses on British and American culture and civilization. Some of them mentioned that they were doing their best to compensate the lack of cultural knowledge by carrying out research, whenever the translation situation required it. With regard to the knowledge and skills covered by the term "cultural competence", my students mentioned only two elements: background cultural knowledge and knowledge specific to a particular domain (basically, terminology). It is not surprising, then, that the areas of cultural competence that they feel they need more practice in are also restricted to names of cultural and government institutions, aspects of historical background and specialized terms. They make no reference to the differences resulting from the source versus target culture genre conventions or from the specific manner of conceptualizing reality.

Both the analysis of the students' translations and the interpretation of their answers point to the fact that, in very many cases, cultural difficulties occur simply because translators do no realize that a certain element of the source text is culture-bound, and consequently, great attention should be given to the manner in which that element is rendered in the target text. The next section starts from the assumption that translation competence can be trained and offers some suggestions in this case.

3. Developing the students' cultural competence: suggested methodology

I consider that the cultural problems that occur in the trainee translators' work, as well as the expectations that the trainees have with regard to the development of their cultural competence must be taken into account when teachers decide on the content of any professional translation course. Students cannot turn into "good" translators if they are not aware of the cultural aspects of the texts to be translated and

if they do not use the most appropriate technique for conveying those aspects into the target language.

What can translator trainers do to help their students in this respect? An immediate answer would be to offer the trainees conditions of contact and practice with regard to all the elements identified in the previous section (and not only). However, as Stolze (2009) notes, the mere description of the linguistic forms which signal cultural elements (e.g. various cultural allusions, field terminology, syntactic patterns, specific concepts, etc.) does not necessarily contribute to increasing the students' cultural competence. This happens because any linguistic feature is characterized by a specific relation to the text in which it is used and, in a different context, it may have a different value (for example, the auxiliary "shall"). Consequently, translator trainers should guide their students in the adoption of a holistic approach, in which they should determine the type of "culture" that is relevant for the text to be translated, on the one hand, and for the target text, on the other, and, then, establish the value of the individual structural elements in relation to their initial findings.

Starting from a series of methodological suggestions that have guided me in my practice as a translator trainer (e.g. Bhatia 1993, Adab 1996, Stolze 2009), I suggest that the holistic approach mentioned above might involve three stages, which do not necessarily form a sequence, but are all valid simultaneously, even if not to the same extent.

a) *Situational considerations of the source and the target texts*

A good understanding of the socio-cultural background in which a certain text was produced, and a parallel with the situation in which its translated variant is meant to function represent important premises for the production of an appropriate translation.

The translator should pay attention to details about the category to which the source text belongs, its producer and the readership for which it is intended. Stolze (2009: 138) points out that the period when the text was produced may also be of relevance, because, for instance, an older technical text generally requires different knowledge regarding terminology in comparison to a report on the most recent scientific developments in a certain field. The translator must also be aware of the purpose that the text, as a representative of its text type or genre, is meant to achieve and of the socio-professional community to which the text belongs. In the light of such aspects, the various types of culture-specific elements should be considered and the role they play in the achievement of the general purpose of the text should be assessed.

At the same time, it is very important for the translators to know exactly who the readers of the target texts they produce will be. Unless informed otherwise, the translation students should assume that their target audience will have the same social characteristics as the readers of the source texts. Similarly, translators must perform an initial evaluation of the possibility that the target situation might present some cultural differences, either in its concepts or in its form. Even the macrostructure of the

source text should be compared to that of a typical text belonging to the same category in the target culture, because, on the basis of this comparison, the translators decide whether they have to reorganize the information in the source text or even omit part of it .

I consider that this first stage plays the most important role in building the students' awareness of the cultural embedding of the text to be translated. Starting from the relevance that each of the elements mentioned here will bear to the task of translating the texts, and from the knowledge that they themselves have in this respect, the future translators decide whether they are capable of translating the text or whether further research is needed .

b) Research stage

If the previous stage indicates some lack of cultural knowledge (for example, of macrostructural, technical or institutional nature), the translator must start doing some research. According to the specific needs of the translation situation, the research activity may take various forms, such as analyzing parallel texts, searching the Internet, consulting a glossary of terms, an encyclopaedia, or even talking to a specialist in the field.

During this stage, teachers help their students develop the ability to acquire the necessary reference sources, a skill which is essential for producing high quality translations. The translator should come back to the research stage at any point during the translation process, whenever he/she considers it necessary.

c) Producing the target text, with special attention to the handling of the culture-specific elements

The correct elucidation of the various culture-bound elements represents an important factor in the recreation of the global message of a text. I will not discuss here the various techniques that translators might use when dealing with cultural elements, but I will make some suggestions referring to the types of problems discussed in the previous section.

Starting from the structural aspects of culture, translators must "decide whether or not a specific source-cultural standard text will be replaced by a target-culture standard text type" (Stolze 2009: 140). In the case of cultural references of various kinds (more specifically, those based on background cultural knowledge), the translator should bring out for the target language reader the exact shades of meaning they convey and decide whether they require further explanation by means of information within brackets in the main body of the text or in a footnote. When the source and the target cultures present institutional or conceptual differences, the translator should use such equivalents that make the translation functional in the target context. The recognized target equivalent should also be the translation solution in the case of the domain specific terms; however, if such an equivalent does not exist, an additional explanation might be given. As regards the various syntactic and lexical patterns which represent genre conventions, the target norms must be always used, independent from the forms in the source variant.

I have referred here to the stage of writing the target text, but, since the focus of this paper is represented by the cultural aspects of translation, I will not get into further details related to obtaining the final variant of a translation. I only want to stress that future translators must be also made aware of the essential role played by translation revision, which is meant not only to check whether their work is linguistically accurate, but also whether it accurately conveys the information inherent in each unit of translation (in the cultural elements, for instance, as it is the case here). In other words, translator trainers should constantly insist on the fact that, once the translator has a complete version of the text, s/he must systematically work through both the source and the target text with a view to assessing the quality of the translation.

4. Conclusion

Cultural elements represent an important feature of pragmatic texts, where they make their presence felt at various levels, from macro-structural organization to lexis and syntactical patterns. The level – or levels – at which the text presents the highest degree of cultural embedding will normally vary according to the text type involved. It is obvious that translator trainers cannot give their students practice with regard to each and every cultural problem that they might encounter in their future career. However, what they should do is to raise the trainee translators' awareness of the forms that the culture-bound elements may take in the source text, and, at the same time, to give them skills that enable them to translate these elements in an appropriate manner.

References

1. Adab, B.J. 1996. *Annotated Texts for Translation: English-French*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
2. Bhatia, V. K. 1993. *Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*, London: Longman.
3. Kastberg, P. 2007. "Cultural Issues Facing the Technical Translator" in *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, no. 8, pp. 104-109 available at *http://www.jostrans.org/issue08/art_kastberg.pdf* [accessed March 2011].
4. Stolze, R. 2009. "Dealing with Cultural Elements in Technical Texts for Translation" in *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, no. 11, pp. 124-142, available at *http://www.jostrans.org/issue11/art_stolze.pdf* [accessed March 2011].

Annex
Questionnaire for translation students
1. To what extent does cultural knowledge contribute to a good translation competence? Please explain.
2. What kind of knowledge and skills are covered by the term "cultural competence"? Refer to the translation of both literary and pragmatic texts.
3. Which are the areas of cultural knowledge and skills that you feel you need more practice in?
4. What kind of training have you had so far with regard to the translator's cultural competence?