TRANSLATION AND CULTURE

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1. Introduction

As a way of introduction I shall peremptorily say that *cheese* is not *fromage* and much less *brânză*. Yet, they are used interchangeably in translation. This assertion is meant to suggest that it is rather difficult and sometimes impossible to translate cultural terms.

Cultural terms cover in any *referential language* – as opposed to *vernacular* – a vast area of vocabulary including both words which denote physical objects-such as cheese- or real events or actions and concepts reflecting mental activity.

A classification of cultural terms according to their semantic content will be a starting point for discussing translation methods and strategies in the light of the linguistic approach, the Skopos theory and the anthropologists' philosophy. As pointed out by translation theories such terms can be translated. What is lost and what is gained in the process is what I shall try to assess further on.

2. Cultural Terms in the Linguistic Approach

Newmark (1988: 95) gives, adapting Nida, the following classification of cultural categories of terms:

Ecology: sirocco, tundra, pampas, savanna, etc.

Material culture (artifacts):

    food: *pizza, sake, hors d'oeuvre, etc.*

    clothes: *anorak, kimono, kaftans, sari, etc.*

    houses and towns: *bourg, bourgade, chalet, palazzo, etc.*

    transport: *rickshaw, tilbury, cabriolet, etc.*

Social culture:

    work and leisure: *reggae, rock, condotierre, etc.*

Organisations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts:

    political and administrative: *Bundestag, Bundesrat, Assemblée Nationale, Pentagon, White House; all acronyms of international institutions such as UNESCO, FAO, UNICEF, NATO, etc.*

    religious: *karma, dharma, etc.*

    artistic: *Art nouveau, Jugendstil, Sturm und Drang, etc.*

    Gestures and habits: *cock a snook, spitting, etc.*

Cultural terms may be translated *semantically* or *communicatively*, depending on the type of text in which they appear, on the readership and on the setting. For example, in an informative text addressed to the general public *civil servants* will be translated in Romanian, as *funcţionari publici*. In a lecture on British civilization addressed to Romanian students – informative but also formative text – the above equivalent will not be enough. A footnote should give a semantic translation – *persoane care servesc publicul* – in order to draw attention on the "cultural" meaning,

on the difference between source language culture and target culture in terms of social behaviour, i.e. officialdom playing a minor part in British administration.

The linguistic approach that generated the above principle of translation, tries to keep a balance between source culture and target culture since "the translator's ultimate consideration should be the recognition of the cultural achievements referred to in the SL text and respect for all foreign countries and their cultures. Two translation procedures which are at opposite ends of the scale are normally available; transference, which usually, in literary texts, offers local colour and atmosphere, and in specialist texts enables the readership (some of which may be more or less familiar with the SL) to identify the referent- particularly a name or a concept in other texts without difficulty. However transference though it is brief and concise, blocks comprehension, it emphasizes the culture and excludes the message; some would say it is not a translation procedure at all. At the other end there is componential analysis, the most accurate translation procedure which excludes the culture and highlights the message. Componential analysis is based on a component common to the SL and TL" (Newmark, 1988: 96) A common component, namely "solid food made from milk which is usually yellow or white in colour" (definition given by the Oxford Dictionary)-makes it possible to give the English *cheese* a French equivalent, *fromage*, and a Romanian one, *brânză*.

3. Nida and the Skopos Theory

If linguists assume that the method of translating culturally-marked texts is somewhat inherent in the type of text and in the type of readership - in terms of cultural competence Newmark distinguishes three such types: *expert, educated generalist* and *uninformed* - the Skopos theory 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 SL text and even its cultural content and replace it with target cultural items, accomplishing thus an *instrumental* (covert) translation- the equivalent of *communicative* translation. The translator may also choose to be faithful to the source text and culture and achieve a *documentary* (overt) translation – what linguists call *semantic* translation.

Although the faithful translation is included in the translator's range of choices, being *one* out of several translation possibilities, the skopos theory is basically oriented towards the target text/ culture/ reader. In this respect Vermeer even speaks of a "dethronement" of the source text. (cf. Vermeer, 2000)

As a functionalist "avant la lettre", Nida illustrates the skopos theory better than its creators. The *dynamic equivalence* as opposed to *formal equivalence* (Nida, 1964: 160) is the method he proposes for the translation of the Bible. The replacement of culture specific concepts of the source text with target culture concepts is the principle of this translation. Probably the best known examples of such translations are the following phrases: one from the Lord's Prayer where "Give us our daily bread" is translated in the Eskimo language as "Give us our daily fish", and the other from the New Testament where "Lamb of God" is translated into the same Eskimo language as "Seal of God". The Christian pastor Nida addresses the Eskimo tribes apparently in their own "cultural" language. His attempt seems "politically correct" (although in his times this concept was not yet in fashion!). In its essence this attempt is actually quite the opposite of any political correctness.

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Assuming that Eskimos cannot see, feel, understand anything beyond their immediate, physical environment is, in fact, quite outrageous!

We can conclude that theories which give the translator full freedom to choose how to translate taking into account a potential reader's profile is rather haphazard. Realizing that risk, the Skopos theorists suggest sharing the responsibility with a client, in accordance with a "commission" (Vermeer, 2000: 229).

4. Translation and Cultural Identity

Translation theories discussed so far referred to cultural items which do not include the language itself, which do not consider the language as a component or feature of culture.

In contrast, language is considered a basic cultural feature by anthropologists and in their philosophy translation appears to be a real contest between languages and cultures, a fight for imposing or/and preserving cultural identity. Translation is a "trial of the foreign" as Antoine Berman (2000:284) puts it and the target oriented language and culture translation is considered an "act of reclaiming, of recentering of the identity, a reterritorializing operation. It does not create a new language but it elevates a dialect to the status of a national and cultural language". (Annie Brisset , 2000: 346)

While Annie Brisset sees this *centered,* i.e. target culture oriented translation, also called *ethnocentric* translation as something positive and creative-this type of translation has brought about, as she points out, the creation of French and German in the XVIth c., elevating vernacular, at the time, German and French languages to the status of referential, cultural languages-Berman (2000) and Meschonnic (1973) consider this type of translation an utter alienation. Therefore they strongly advise to replace it with *decentered,* i.e. faithful to the source language and culture translation. Deploring the ethnocentric way of translating the Old Testament from Hebrew – a language governed by paratax- into Greek and Latin- languages governed by syntax –Meschonnic proposes a fully literal way of translating, a *decentered* translation meant to "free" this writing from the Christian spirit infused into it by the mere procedure of transposition which brought about paratax being turned into syntax. What Meschonnic and Berman claim for is a faithfulness to the very structure of the source language, to its *forma mentis,* at the expense of the target language structural identity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion as translation theory argues translation can make intercultural communication possible but it can also be a source of misunderstanding and frustration. Neither *centered* or *decentered* translations are good or bad in themselves. It's their use that may be inadequate, that may turn into an abuse.

References

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