

Culturally-Marked Vocabulary in Translation of Russian Political Media Discourse

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Abstract: Globalization has always had a great influence on cultural identity. In modern times, the issue of cultural identity is highly topical because of the significance of the preservation of the traditional cultures and values that interweave into the processes of globalization.

The present study deals with the problem of national identity revealed in nationally-marked media texts in political discourse. This article presents a theoretical framework of translation theory, describing the translation techniques of transfer of culture-specific vocabulary into a foreign language. This analysis is based on interviews with foreign and native receivers that reflect their understanding of nationally “loaded” elements that exist within one given culture, but not in another (lacunas). The results show that the way of decoding a culturally-marked media message may have different effects on the communication outcomes.

Keywords: National identity, media discourse, culturally-marked text, lacuna, translation techniques, equivalence, source language, target text.

1. Introduction

In the modern era of global communication technologies, the media – the press, radio, television, cinema, and the internet – help disseminate “preferred” ideas. Social values are, to a large extent, shaped by both media influence and its specific use. In spite of the fact that a given people dwell in a common physical space, their mentalities are often quite different. Like any other kind of discourse, national media discourse often includes culture-specific vocabulary that is determined by the traditional linguistic and cultural identity of each nation. On the subject of intercultural communication in the political sphere, the current issue is translation of culturally-marked texts. In this paper we argue that using equivalent-lacking words in political media discourse frequently causes misunderstandings and feelings of isolation. Sometimes this provokes critical attitude in a receiver to an information provider that, in terms of political communication, may cause global consequences if a cultural barrier is not overcome in the translation.

2. Conceptualization of Key Terms

According to Kirkpatrick (2005), a crucial function of language is to provide identity.

National identity may be defined as a set of beliefs, traditions and practices shared by a collectivity called nation, and differentiated from other groups.

Hall's (1992) study found the following:

National identity, like other identities, is about using resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from”, so much as “what we might become”. Thus national identity is in reality “cross-cut” by deep internal divisions differences, and “unified” only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power (p. 276).

In this paper, national identity is considered in terms of usage of lacunas represented by nationally- or culturally-marked vocabulary in political media texts. Since the introduction of the concept of discourse to modern scientific inquiry, studies of this phenomenon have been carried out within a variety of traditions that investigate the relationships between languages, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, cultural studies, literary theory, and the philosophy of science. Within these fields, the notion of “discourse” is itself subject to discourse. That is, it is debated on the basis of specialized knowledge. Discourse can be observed in the use of spoken, written and sign language and multimodal/multimedia forms of communication, and is not found only in “non-fictional” or verbal materials (“Discourse”, 2010).

Having analyzed discourse studies of Russian linguists Arutyunova (1990), Stepanov (1995), Kubryakova (2000), Demyankov (2001), and Netherlandian professor Teun Van Dijk (1997), we can define media discourse as a coherent verbal or non-verbal, oral or written text expressed through mass media and representing an act which takes place in social and cultural interaction, which reflects a communicant’s way of thinking.

Mass media texts are those that communicate with a mass audience, such as television and video, newspapers, magazines, film, computer software, and radio. Anyone who receives a media text, whether it is a book read alone or a film viewed in a theatre, is a member of an audience.

Modern translation studies are concerned with the relationship between translation behavior and socio-cultural factors. Political discourse relies on translation, in the sense that linguistic behavior influences political behavior. International politics involve extensive translation (Trosborg, 2000). Agreements between countries are always made available in several languages. Therefore, interpreters are crucial participants in these political events, facilitating the work of international institutions. Some governments even put translations of significant documents on their websites. Conversely, the quality of translated information provided on non-official websites or by online newspapers is not of high quality, even though these sources have great audience popularity.

In our study we hold the opinion of Antipov et al. (1989) who argued:

Since audiences receive media content through the lens of their own culture, it is already pre-programmed that certain aspects of foreign media content might not be understood, might be misunderstood or not enjoyed when consumed – or foreign media content might not be selected for consumption at all. Media content that makes obvious a gap between the culture of the producer and the culture of the audience is perceived as something incomprehensible, unusual, exotic, strange, unknown, omissible or unexpected. Media content is not culturally relevant for audiences when they do not perceive a connection between the content and themselves. (p. 183)

This phenomenon, when there is no one-to-one correspondence between languages, is referred to as untranslatability, and is studied under the topic of lacuna theory. In the context of linguistics, the term “lacuna” refers to linguistic features that exist within one given culture, but not in another. In a wider context, the term is used for any incident in which something exists in one culture but not in another. This may include values, attitudes, knowledge, experience, or expectations.

Russian ethno-psycholinguists first introduced the so-called “lacuna model”, which was developed for classifying and examining the linguistic cross-cultural components of languages (Sorokin & Markovina, 1993). The lacuna model is a tool for unlocking cultural differences or missing “gaps” in translation. Although the lacuna model was established as a theory by Sorokin and Markovina (1993), it was further developed by Ertelt-Vieth (2005).

Research using the lacuna model has been done in foreign language acquisition (Turunen, 2005), cultural studies (Hiller, 2005), and advertising research (Grodzki, 2003).

According to Proshina (1999), lacunas are generally rendered in the borrowing language through explicatory translation and lexical substitution. An explicatory translation reveals a lacuna meaning in full; however, explication of a lacuna is more often given in written texts and made in commentaries (both in-text and after-text), and in footnotes. Analogue substitutions can be used to have proper impact upon the receiver. There are also known cases of reduction in translating lacunas.

3. Method

Source material used in this study included speeches, official addresses, press conference and professional meeting transcripts as well as their translations into English on British and American websites, including online newspapers. Through the process of analyzing Russian political media texts, a number of examples containing elements of culturally-marked texts were selected for further investigation.

In the next stage of investigation, in-depth research interviews with native speakers of the target language were conducted in order to help understand the significance of various categories of culturally bound expressions, the methods of their translation, and the reasons for translation errors. The interviewees were asked to state the clarity of the analyzed items, to give an explanation or equivalent for the given expressions, to correct any necessary mistakes in language and style and to express their general opinion concerning the texts. The interviews were conducted in an open-ended and conversational manner. In total, 25 native speakers of English, aged 25-50 years old, were interviewed.

The interview analysis included singling out the following classifications:

- 1) types of lacunas
- 2) translation errors
- 3) methods of translating lacunas

4. Features of Lacunas and Types of Lacunas

Lacunas possess some specific features enabling one to determine them in context:

incomprehensibility, exoticism, and being alien for a receiver.

There exist a few classifications of lacunas. Ertelt-Vieth (2005) identifies the first dimension as having three major categories as: mental lacunas, activity lacunas and object lacunas; and the second dimension as axiological lacunas.. All lacunas can be confrontational, contrastive, implicit, explicit, relative, profound, absolute, relational and/or structural. For the present investigation, we use a general classification, consisting of language lacunas and cultural lacunas.

The British scholar, Catford (1965), considered that the validity of differentiation between linguistic and cultural untranslatability is questionable. He defined linguistic untranslatability as a failure in finding an equivalent for the target language item in view of differences between two language systems.

An example from a speech by Russian president Dmitriy Medvedev (2010e) illustrates the above-mentioned phenomenon of linguistic untranslatability. The phrase *popast' v ochen' bol'shuyu peredryagu* is used in the following context: *It is very important that in the future the truth about the war be preserved and that there be no attempts to rewrite history to suit the ambitions of individual politicians. Otherwise there is a chance that all of us, in Europe and the whole world, will once again find ourselves in a very serious predicament* (Medvedev, 2010c). The president uses a very emotional colloquial expression, which in the target text is replaced with a neutral word combination. According to dictionaries, the equivalent of the source expression would be “to get into a scrape” which is also colloquial. The translator probably decided that such an expression would be inappropriate for the political context and, as a result, made the speaker’s statement non-emphatic. Here then, we can see the loss of connotation in the translation.

The second kind of untranslatability is cultural, which is defined as a failure stemming from the lack of a situational and/or functional absence in the target culture. This is more crucial than linguistic untranslatability (Catford, 1965). An interesting example of cultural untranslatability is the Russian word combination *tsar'-batyushka*. According to foreign historians, “tsar-batyushka” is a term of endearment meaning “dear father tsar”. Conversely, “dear father tsar” is not an equivalent translation, because the Russian word “*batyushka*” has a much wider meaning than the English word “father” and implies a different attitude, including a kind of highly patriotic respect, addressed only to a ruler or a country rather than to one’s own biological or spiritual father. Further, Dmitry Medvedev (2010a) uses this word in a negative context, taking into consideration that democracy is referred to as a stronghold of peace. So, usage of the positively connoted word “*batyushka*” in the negative context would sound strange to a foreign receiver; that is why the translator’s choice to omit the lacuna can be admitted correct in the given situation: *I am saying something banal, but it’s still obvious: Russian democracy is only 20 years old. The Soviet Union was no democracy and Russia under the Tsar wasn’t either. That is why our statehood is more than 1,000 years in the traditional sense, and 20 years old when measured by democracy* (Medvedev, 2010b).

Semantically, we single out language lacunas, speech lacunas and mixed lacunas.

By language lacuna, we mean lacunas which are commonly used in speech and are fixed in dictionaries of the source language. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin (2007b) used the phrase *ne pryatat' ni pod podushkoi, ni pod odeyalom...* The

speaker wanted to make his words sound ironic, but the interviews show that this attempt was unsuccessful because of the literal translation: *And if today the new American Defense Minister declares that the United States will not hide these superfluous weapons in a warehouse or, as one might say, under a pillow or under a blanket, then I suggest that we all rise and greet this declaration standing. It would be a very important declaration* (Putin, 2007a).

According to the opinion of the interviewees this expression is “clear enough, but there’s not really any English equivalent and it sounds awkward”. Unlike in the Russian language, in the English language the word combinations “to hide under a pillow” or “under a blanket” have a denotative meaning. In Russian, we can use it implying something that is kept secretly. The proper way of translation in the given case would be to omit these word combinations, as the verb “to hide” already implies keeping secretly and does not require intensification.

Speech lacunas are unexpected and quite unpredictable, original, occur occasionally, and are often used only once. The Russian phrase *sapogi vsmyatku* (Putin, 2005a) was translated literally: *This is total nonsense, absurdity, soft-boiled boots* (Putin, 2005b). We consider that a proper translation would be omission of the expression “soft-boiled boots,” which seems strange to the receivers as it is an individual speech lacuna. The audience do not know “what soft-boiled boots would mean”. In fact, this expression is a synonym of “nonsense” and “absurdity,” but the literal translation proves it difficult for the target language speakers to make any connection.

Mixed lacunas take place in cases when, in both the source and target languages, one part of a culturally marked expression exists and has the same meaning in both languages, whereas another part is a speech lacuna. At one of the press conferences, Vladimir Putin said: *Ya by za eti den'gi s"el i Yanukovicha, i vashego prem'era* (Putin, 2010b). In both languages there is an expression “to eat someone” in the connotative meaning, implying “to scare” or “to offend.” However, in both languages the expression “to eat somebody for money” does not exist. According to the interviewees’ opinion in the English language, “there are not any expressions referencing cannibalism to cost”. Thus, the translator should have better used the phrase “I could buy all of Ukraine for that price,” instead of translating word-for-word: *The price that was rolled out – it is unbearable. I could eat Yanukovich and your prime minister together for that money. But there's no military base in the world that costs this much money* (Putin, 2010a).

5. Translating Lacunas in Media Texts

Generally, all translators, at some point in time, face untranslatable items across languages. A competent translator should be aware that translation of a political text, which is transmitted through media all over the world, is not a mere process of transferring words from one text into another.

Ultimately though, however logical, sensitive, or insightful the decisions made by a translator may be, it is impossible to produce a translation which accounts for each and every feature that makes the original text unique. At the same time, the translation can potentially produce new meanings through features that relate only to the domestic language and culture. This is inherent in the process of domestication of foreign texts, as explained by Venuti (1995):

Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target language reader. This difference can never be entirely removed, of course, but it necessarily suffers a reduction and exclusion of possibilities – and an exorbitant gain of other possibilities specific to the translating language (p. 18).

Translating political media texts requires immense responsibility, as the results of this work affect not only basic comprehension, but also the public image of politicians and, sometimes, the outcome of serious negotiations. A politician's image is formed simultaneously in the real and fictitious dimensions, which entangle with each other and are often identified in the audience's mind.

We put forward the classification of translation errors in order to illustrate misunderstandings, explain their reasons, and offer preferred equivalent translations. Translation errors can be divided into the following groups:

- 1) literal translation
- 2) unnecessary explicatory translation
- 3) choosing false equivalents leading to distortion of the meaning

Literal translation of language lacuna is one of the most widespread errors in the analyzed texts.

Putin's phrase *tovarisch volk znaet, kogo kushat'* (Putin, 2006a) is frequently quoted and discussed on the Internet, but its meaning still remains obscure for foreign receivers. *We see, after all, what is going on in the world. The Comrade Wolf knows whom to eat, as the saying goes. It knows whom to eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems. Where is all this pathos about the need to fight for human rights and democracy when it comes to the need to pursue their own interests? Here everything is possible. There are no limits* (Putin, 2006b).

The literal translation of this cultural lacuna, which is an allusion to a Russian fable, is not clear for a foreign receiver. In this fable the wolf says to the lamb: "Your guilt consists in this – I am hungry!" The audience consider that the closest expression would be "a snake knows when to strike." This shows they did not understand the connotation of the given statement. A preferred equivalent translation, reflecting the idea of the statement would be "...the one who is stronger always makes the weaker guilty".

Sometimes a translator is not sure if a culturally bound word will be understood by a receiver and, for this reason, uses explicatory translation. However, very often this is not necessary, because a similar notion exists in the target language. Addressing to the representatives of the US public, academic and political circles, Dmitriy Medvedev (2010f) called the Brookings institution *kuznitsa kadrov amerikanskoi politicheskoi elity* which was translated as: *Before I make a few opening remarks, I first of all want to thank you for this invitation to speak at one of America's leading think tanks. It is deservedly seen as a stronghold of liberal thinking, and I know that it is also reputed as a place that has produced many members of the US political elite* (Medvedev, 2010d).

The Russian word "*kuznitsa*" literally means a "smithy." In this situation it is used figuratively and implies what is mentioned in the translation – a place that produces something. President Medvedev preferred this word to underline what hard work must have been done in

the given institution (the Brookings Institution, USA) to produce such a great number of the most highly educated researchers. In the English language we can say, for example, “a smithy of ideas”, referring to some scientific context. This word in its figurative meaning is quite clear to a foreign receiver, and a proper translation in this case could be “a smithy of many members of the US political elite,” which would convey Medvedev’s implication of the hard work done to achieve the results.

Choosing false equivalents is one of the most frequent types of translation errors; this includes replacing lacunas by expressions which do not exist in the target language or sound foreign to the receivers.

In one of his speeches, Putin (2008a) uses the phrase *kazhdy dolzhen motyzhit’...* which contains a language lacuna. *Everyone should tend his own garden, like St Francis, boom boom, every day, and then success will be assured* (Putin, 2008b). In this example the language lacuna is the Russian word “*motyzhit’*” meaning “to dig with a hoe” literally and “to work very hard” figuratively. Putin used this verb in figurative meaning, but the translator’s equivalent has a denotative meaning, so the target language speakers misunderstood the whole idea: “I have remotely heard of ‘tending your own garden’ which to us means focusing on our own area of influence and not worrying about areas where you don’t have control.” A correct translation might be “to work very hard” which is neutral and unemotional, but equivalent.

Summing up the above analysis, we can make a conclusion that equivalent-lacking words in the Russian political media texts bear quite a concrete character and can be researched in the theory of translation. Knowing the difficulties which a translator faces when transferring a text, promotes making an equivalent translation. This will help overcome a cultural barrier in the process of communication.

6. Conclusion

There can be no argument that a translator working in the sphere of international relations should achieve a close relationship between the theory and the practice of translation. The choice of principles of translation may not be purely intuitive because the translator necessarily takes into account such matters as the aim of translation, the cultural gap between the original author and the receiver of the message, and the kind of a receiver the target text is intended for. Each aspect provides a problem for consideration and solution in the course of translation.

We have partly investigated a multifaceted and contradictory issue covering the problem of rendering culturally-marked vocabulary into a foreign language in the process of intercultural communication. Analysis of translation helps reveal how the typical difficulties of translation connected with the national identity of each language may be overcome. Equivalent-lacking elements can be found primarily among the words indicating specific notions and national realities, among little known national folklore, proverbs and sayings for which we have to create occasional correspondences in the process of translation.

We argue that the method of translation depends on the type of a lacuna. Thus, from the results of the conducted interviews, choosing equivalents in the target language proves to be the most appropriate for language lacunas, and sometimes for mixed lacunas, whereas omission might be used in case of speech lacunas due to impossibility of an equivalent translation. The

omission of language and mixed lacunas is very undesirable as it often leads not only to the loss of national identity but also to an incomplete rendering of the main message.

The quantitative analysis shows that cases of literal translation account for 78.6%, choosing false equivalents – 14.3% and unnecessary explicatory translation – 7.1% of errors. These figures prove that conveying the messages by translators of foreign media sources, unfortunately, is often not provided in the most effective way, as shown in interviews with native speakers of the English language.

All in all, there is no doubt that a relation exists between untranslatability and linguistic and cultural factors. Culturally bound words are a special part of the culture. Often they are unique and charming, and convey a tiny part of the national spirit and mentality, and it is a translator who decides whether to keep their uniqueness or remove them in order to follow formal political style. As long as the World Wide Web and press are a medium of communication that allows information to be transmitted on a global scale, it is the duty of a translator to overcome the untranslatable conditions by various methods, some of which are presented and described in this paper with the aim to prove the necessity of researching culturally-marked vocabulary for translator's activity.

Much practical and theoretical work has to be done on the classification of language and cultural lacunas, describing their functions in media texts, revealing their influence on the receiver, and selecting methods of equivalent translation, as this problem is of the highest importance to interaction and intercultural dialogue in modern society.

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