

## DEALING WITH CULTURAL REFERENCES IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLE TRANSLATION

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**ABSTRACT.** My paper is a case study on the way cultural references within newspaper articles are transferred from the source language (English) into the target language (Romanian). “Cultural reference” is used as an umbrella term which flexibly covers the particularities of a certain language, others than the linguistic ones. The text corpus includes newspaper articles taken from *Newsweek*, focused mainly on political, economic and social issues. To translate culturally-bound words or expressions, the translator may use addition, componential analysis, cultural equivalence, descriptive equivalent, literal translation, recognized translation, reduction, synonymy, transference, deletion or combination – to mention just a few of the strategies at his disposal. My conclusion is that perfect translation of culturally-bound items is impossible. The translation focusing on the purpose of the source language text writing is, however, always possible.

**Keywords:** cultural references, descriptive equivalent, recognized translation, cultural equivalence

Motto:

“Whatever difference the translation conveys is now imprinted by the target-language culture, assimilated to its positions of intelligibility, its canons and taboos, its codes and ideologies. The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political.”  
(Venuti 93)

Translation involves not only the transfer of “meaning” contained in one set of language signs into another set of language signs through competent use of dictionary and grammar, but also a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria. Cultural transfer may be viewed as counterposed to what can be called “grammatical” translation which is bound to the written text on the page. Culture awareness is one key element that the translator must always keep in mind when performing any type of translation. In Gamal’s words, cultural translation does not “denote a particular kind of translation strategy, but rather a *perspective* on translations that focuses on their emergence and impact as components in the ideological traffic between language groups.” (Gamal 67). Although it consists of different translation strategies, cultural transfer is, above all, an ideological negotiation.

The translation of cultural references, whether literary or belonging to specialised texts, is ever more important due to what is known as the cultural turn in humanities that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Susan Bassnett contends that translation studies, maybe more than any other field, “offers an ideal ‘laboratory situation’ for the study of cultural interaction, since a comparison of the original and the translated text will not only show the strategies employed by translators at certain moments, but will also reveal the different status of the two texts in their several literary systems. More broadly, it will expose the relationship between the two cultural systems in which those texts are embedded.” (Bassnett 19).

The first issue to be clarified refers to the definition of a culture-bound item. I consider “cultural references” a broad flexible category which does not exist by itself but is “the result of a conflict arising from any linguistically represented reference in a source text which, when transferred to a target language, poses a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value (whether determined by ideology, usage, frequency, etc.) of the given item in the target language culture.” (Aixelá 57) Thus, any linguistic item may become a culture-bound term, depending on the context where it is used.

Cultural meanings are intricately woven into the texture of the language. The writer’s ability to capture and project them is of primary importance, and should be reflected in the translated work. Caught between the need to capture the local colour and the need to be understood by an audience outside the original cultural and linguistic situation, a translator must always be aware of both cultures. One of the main goals

of translation is to initiate the target-language reader into the sensibilities of the source-language culture. As Susan Bassnett notes, translation studies have undergone an important shift from source-oriented theories to target-text-oriented theories (Bassnett 15).

The process of transmitting cultural elements through translation is a complicated and vital task. Culture is a complex collection of experiences which conditions daily life; it includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. This is difficult to comprehend completely. Especially in relation to a target language, one important question is whether the translation will have any readership at all, as the specific reality being portrayed is not quite familiar to the reader.

As a type of discourse, the newspaper article does not narrate but analyses reality, searching for events or ideas which might back up whatever the author wants to prove. Moreover, what makes journalistic discourse different from other types of discourse is the use of language in its state-of-the-art form (for example, newly created idiomatic expressions or abbreviations); yet, every once in a while one may encounter references that go well back in time. A specific aspect encountered when translating the journalistic discourse takes the form of cultural references. The main body of a newspaper usually covers home affair topics (unless it is specialized on foreign affairs only) and, consequently, it is abundant in culture-bound terms. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. It is the translator who has to mediate between these two worlds.

To translate culturally-bound words or expressions, the translator may use addition, componential analysis, cultural equivalent, descriptive equivalent, literal translation, recognized translation, reduction, synonymy, transference, deletion, and combination – to mention just a few of the strategies at his disposal.

Recognized translation is best used to translate institutional terms whose translation is already recognized and well established. Even if the institutions are alien to the receiving culture, they are nevertheless understandable as there certainly are analogous ones in the latter culture as well. The use of new translation with whatever procedure may confuse the readers and lead them to misinterpret, especially if they already have some degree of knowledge of the source language. When something about language has been accepted, it means it is a convention. One recurrent phrase in the corpus is the *White House* (the executive branch and mansion of the U.S. government) – translated word-for-word (a calque) – *Casa Albă*, a translation which has become widely accepted in Romanian. Examples of translated institutional terms from the corpus of articles include: *Council on Foreign Relations* – *Consiliul de Relații Externe*; *U.S. Army Special Forces* – *Forțele Speciale ale Armatei Statelor Unite*; *Civil Rights Act* – *Legea drepturilor civile*; *Immigration and Nationality Act* – *Legea imigrării și a naționalității*; *Board of Supervisors* – *Consiliul Supervizorilor*; *Supreme Court* – *Curtea Supremă*; *State Department* – *Departamentul de Stat*; *National Association of Colleges* – *Asociația națională a universităților*; *Creative Artists Agency* – *Uniunea Artiștilor*; *Hispanic Communications Network* – *Rețeaua de Comunicații Hispanice*; *Office of urban policy* – *Biroul de politică urbană*.

Professions or positions are appropriately translated with cultural equivalents as they exist in both Romanian and English cultures. However, there are some differences between the two, especially when it comes to the professions that are based on the American federal system and which do not have equivalents in the Romanian classified list of jobs. In such cases, the translator has to resort to a descriptive equivalent in order to explain the term. It is what Aixelá calls “intratextual gloss” (Aixelá 62) – a brief description within the text meant to keep the reader focused on the text without distracting his attention. Sometimes the translator has to look the word up in a specialized dictionary to see whether Romanian has a close equivalent for the same concept.

Here are some examples of jobs, some of them with a strong cultural connotation:

- *Marine Gen.* – *general de marină*;
- *national-security adviser* – *consilier pe probleme de securitate națională*;
- *domestic-policy adviser* – *consilier pe probleme de politică internă*;
- *Supreme Allied Commander* – *Comandantul Suprem al Forțelor Aliate* - the commander of NATO's Allied Command Operations has the title "Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)";
- *appellate judge* –  *judecător al Curții de apel*;
- *district-court judge* –  *judecător la Curtea federală* – a judge in the trial courts of the federal court system;
- *state comptroller* –  *controlor financiar* – a public official responsible for auditing government accounts and sometimes certifying expenditures;
- *pollster* –  *realizator de sondaje* - a professional whose primary job is conducting private pre-election polls and advising candidates on election strategy;

- *Treasury secretary – Ministru de finanțe* - the head of the United States Department of the Treasury, concerned with finance and monetary matters, and, until 2003, some issues of national security and defense; this position in the Federal Government of the United States is analogous to the finance ministers of other nations;
- *NASA administrator - directorul NASA* - the highest-ranking official of that organization and serves as the senior space science advisor to the President of the United States;
- *management consultant – consultant de management;*
- *investment analyst – analist de investiții;*
- *publicity agent – agent de publicitate.*

What is to be noted is the fact that many names of jobs in Romanian are calques from English. This is a respectful strategy of translation which may also account for the great number of English borrowed words that are to be found in present Romanian vocabulary.

A problematic profession to be translated into Romanian is *anchorwoman*. According to the dictionary, it is a television personality who presents material prepared for a news program and at times must improvise commentary for live presentation. The term is mainly used in the United States and Canada. Anchors are traditionally distinguished from other types of presenters by being able to provide live commentary for the audience during breaking news events. Many news anchors are also involved in writing and/or editing the news for their programs. Sometimes news anchors interview or engage in discussions. The term *anchor* (sometimes anchorperson, anchorman, or anchorwoman) was coined by CBS News producer Don Hewitt. A Romanian translation could be *moderator*; however part of the idea expressed by the noun *anchor* is lost. This is an instance of naturalization, when the translator decides to bring the culture-bound term into the intertextual corpus by substituting or domesticating it.

The article *Welcome to Elsewhere* speaks about a generic type of occupation referred to as *white-collar worker*, an idiom indicating a salaried professional or a person whose job is clerical in nature, as opposed to a *blue-collar worker* whose job is more in line with manual labor. White-collar work is an informal term as there is no accepted enumeration of white-collar jobs to the extent that it is typically defined as any job that is not blue-collar. It is again a strong culture-bound element, typical to well-established capitalist reality. The phrase could be translated as *intelectual* or *funcționar*. Yet, the expression may also be translated into Romanian by means of a calque: *gulere albe* and this is probably the best choice.

The article *A Man for A' That* is full of cultural references; in fact the whole article is about a Scottish poet, Robert Burns. It is a framed or a *mise-en-abîme* cultural reference, because we have an American writer addressing an American public and speaking about the national bard of the Scots. The main difficulties encountered by the translator refer to the literary quotations. The titles of the poems mentioned in the article are: *A Man for A' That* (translated *În ciudă* by Ștefan Octavian Iosif) and *Long Lang Syne* which has become so widely known, part of the universal culture, that can be left untranslated in Romanian or can be rendered *Timpuri de mult apuse* (a translation by Dana Buzoianu). In the second case, the translator should mention the original name of the song because it is more likely to ring a bell in the reader's mind than the Romanian version. There is also a quotation from the poem which is also the headline: *That Man to Man, the world o'er, Shall brothers be for a' that*. The translator must go back to the standing version of the poem in Romanian: *Când om către om să-și întindă cu drag, O mână de frate — în ciudă!* (Ștefan Octavian Iosif). The method used here is cultural equivalence combined with modulation.

Probably the strongest culture-bound elements are the proper names. A name is a linguistic cultural element, and an author uses it for its associative value. It resists translation; therefore its evocative value is lost. Aixelá contends that this is, in fact, one of the paradoxes of translation: "the fact that something absolutely identical, even in its graphic component, might be absolutely different in its collective reception." (Aixelá 61) Romanian can hardly be described as a prescriptive language, the way Spanish or French are. There has been a clear tendency, especially since 1990, towards orthographic preservation of proper nouns in translation. Newspaper articles account to a large extent for a great number of anglicisms that have been penetrating the Romanian vocabulary. This is an interesting, relatively new phenomenon whose consequences cannot be measured yet. Because language is a living organism, one cannot make predictions regarding its future. According to David Crystal, "The emergence of English with a genuine global presence therefore has a significance which goes well beyond this particular language. Because there are no precedents for languages achieving this level of use (if we exclude Latin which was in a sense 'global' when the world was much smaller), we do not know what happens to them in such circumstances. The English language has already grown to be independent of any form of social control." (Crystal 140).

The article *Who We Are Now?* puts forward several cultural problems, all of them in connection with the American history and its realities. Awareness of history is an essential requirement for the translator of a work coming from an alien culture. Knowledge of a foreign language, its vocabulary, and grammar is not sufficient to make one competent as a translator. One should be familiar with one's own culture and be aware of the source-language culture before attempting to build any bridge between them. The sentence "George Washington took the oath at Federal Hall in New York City" might not create a complete image into the mind of the translation reader (Federal Hall, once located at 26 Wall Street in New York City, was the first capitol of the United States; the building is now operated by the National Park Service as the Federal Hall National Memorial). *Palatul Federal* does not evoke so many things in the Romanian reader's mind. "America since the first slaves arrived in Jamestown, Va., in 1619" - the evocative value of *Jamestown* (a former village on the James River in Virginia to the north of Norfolk; site of the first permanent English settlement in America) is lost in translation. There is also the abbreviation Va. which stands for Virginia. The sentence: *Not every part of the country is like Bronx* starts from the supposition that the reader knows that Bronx is a poor district of New York where most of the people are of a different race or ethnicity, otherwise the sentence does not make too much sense.

An even more obscure example is provided by *Roe v. Wade as far off as Dred Scott*. Both names refer to famous American trials that are now part of the American collective memory: the first one, *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was a United States Supreme Court case that resulted in a landmark decision about abortion. According to the *Roe* decision, most laws against abortion in the United States violated a constitutional right to privacy. The second one refers to *Dred Scott*, a slave who sued unsuccessfully for his freedom in the famous *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case of 1856. His case was based on the fact that he and his wife Harriet were slaves, but had lived in states and territories where slavery was illegal. In these cases, an explanatory note is needed to offer data which is beyond the grasp of the reader. This descriptive equivalent or "extratextual gloss" (Aixelá 62) is therefore marked as such by means of footnote, endnote, glossary, commentary, etc.

A further example of culture-embedded element is *the Mad Men of advertising* (in *Welcome to Elsewhere*) which abruptly occurs in a paragraph as a comparison. The phrase seems to have been created for American ears only. Actually, it references a popular American television drama series called *Mad Men*, set in New York City and its commuter suburban towns. The series is broadcast on cable network AMC. It takes place in 1960 at the fictional Sterling Cooper advertising agency on New York City's Madison Avenue and centers on a high-level advertising executive and the people in his life in and out of the office. It also depicts the changing social mores of early 1960s America. The series observes advertising as a corporate outlet for creativity for mainstream, middle-class, young, white men. The series has been recently bought by a Romanian TV channel and translated *Mad Men - Nebunii de pe Madison Avenue*, in an interesting combination that brings together the English title and its Romanian adaptation. This brings about another controversial issue - the translation of film titles which frequently allows the "autonomous creation" (Aixelá 64), i.e. more freedom to put in cultural references which do not exist in the source text.

*The Boy Scouts of America* (*Campfire Questions* article) points again to a reality which is not familiar to the Romanian reader; it is a corporation that operates through a national council that charters local councils all over the United States; the purpose is character building and citizenship training. The translator has to consider whether similar or parallel language resources exist in the culture of the target language. *Cercetașii Americii* is an equivalent which is correct from a linguistic point of view but which lacks the cultural charge in the source language. Basically, they are synonymous but the cultural implicature resists translation.

Translation is not just a movement between two languages but also between two cultures. Cultural transposition is present in all translations and requires replacing items whose roots are in the source language culture with elements that are indigenous to the target language. Newspaper articles are not an exception, with their plethora of cultural references. Fortunately, the translator has a broad array of strategies at his disposal when faced with cultural references. Therefore, a successful translation may depend on the translator's command of cultural assumptions in both languages in which he works. Besides a good knowledge of the source language, the translator must also be familiar with its culture: "Many people wrongly assume that language and culture must exist in dictionaries, grammars, and encyclopedias, but this is obviously not true. Such books are only limited attempts to describe some of the more salient features of these two interrelated patterns of behavior. The real location of language and culture is in the heads of participants." (Nida 33)

If the reality being represented is not familiar to the audience, the translation stumbles and becomes difficult to read. The translator would have to consider whether similar or parallel language resources exist in the culture of the target language. A translator has to look for equivalents in terms of relevance in the target language and exercise discretion by substituting rather than translating certain elements in a work. Even with all the apparent cultural barriers, a translator can still create equivalence by the judicious use of resources.

Language is a part of culture and is influenced and restricted by culture. The same word used in different cultural backdrops may mean differently and different words may mean the same. Perfect translation of culturally-bound text is impossible. The translation focusing on the purpose of the source language text writing is, however, always possible.

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