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Translation of Culture and Culture of Translation

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The translating of unmatched elements of culture poses two problems for translation theory and practice: (1) that of possible procedures available to the translator in dealing with a particular element of culture, and (2) that of strategy, or the choice of the procedure best suited for a particular act of communication. The first problem is the easier of the two, since the list of possible procedures (and their combinations) is finite, including (a) borrowing, (b) definition and paraphrase, (c) literal translation, (d) substitution, (e) lexical creation, (f) addition, (g) omission. The second problem is more difficult, involving as it does the more general problem of the culture of translation. The translator's strategy is determined by his understanding of the communicative function of the element of culture to be translated in that particular context of situation, his interpretation of the position (value) of that element in the source culture and its possible counterpart(s) in the target culture, his knowledge of the contrastive relations between the source and the target language, and his awareness of the translating traditions in the target culture.

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Any act of translation represents an attempt to bridge the gap between two cultures. In fact, any act of communication – even when it takes place within a single language and requires no translation – is an attempt to bridge cultural gaps. In this case, the gaps are due to the cultural peculiarities or individualities of the participants engaged in the act of communication. Culture is here taken to mean the totality of human knowledge, beliefs, lifestyles, patterns of behaviour derived from Man's ability to absorb knowledge and transmit it from one member of the social community to another and from one generation to another.

It is precisely because cultures – and languages as their expressions and therefore also their integral components – differ among themselves that we need translations. At the same time, such differences are the root cause of difficulties in translation. The difficulties are of two kinds: those that appear on the level of reception (where the



translator, like any other receiver, must grasp the cultural content of the sender's message, including the content that is implicit rather than explicit) and those that appear on the level of production (where the translator, like any other sender, must find the appropriate linguistic expression in the target language for the cultural content at hand).

To counterbalance the already noted fact that cultures differ among themselves, which makes translation necessary, we need to recognize also that cultures have many points in common, which makes translation possible. Similarities among cultures are the greater, the smaller the spatial and/or temporal distance between the social groups that develop them. Even distant cultures have enough similarity – deriving from the common biosphere in which they develop and the common biological (psycho-physical) make up of the members of the human race – to make translation possible. In translation, the matched elements of the source and the target culture are simply “mapped”: no transfer of cultural content takes place since in that particular segment we are dealing with one culture and not two. The situation is quite different when a source-culture element that needs to be translated is unmatched in the target culture. In trying to achieve cultural transfer, that is, to translate a cultural content which is a feature of the source but not of the target culture, the translator faces two problems: (1) the problem of finding possible procedures for the translation of unmatched element of culture, and (2) the problem of strategy, or choice from among the possible translational procedures (since not all of the possible procedures are equally suitable for each act of communication).

1.

The problem of possible procedures for the translation of unmatched elements of culture is relatively easy to solve: simple observation of translators' practice will result in a more or less exhaustive list of such procedures (or their various combinations). The possible procedures include (a) borrowing, (b) definition or paraphrase, (c) literal translation, (d) substitution, (e) lexical creation, (f) addition, (g) omission. These will be taken for granted here rather than elaborated in further detail since they were exemplified and analyzed in an earlier paper by the same author (Ivir 1987). A more intricate, and therefore also more interesting, problem is the choice of the particular procedure in the particular act of communication involving translation, or an objective account of the translator's strategy in each particular case.

Faced with an element of source culture lacking a counterpart in the target culture, and therefore also lacking a ready-made linguistic expression for such an element in the target language, the translator reaches for one of the procedures listed here or one of their possible combinations. The translator knows that his choice cannot be random and that in a given act of translational communication only one of the procedures is acceptable (or at least optimal), while the others are unacceptable or sub-optimal. It is precisely for this reason that we regard the translator's choice as a matter of culture of translation (where



‘culture’ is taken to mean a developed sense for, and a refined attitude to, translation) – both the translator’s personal culture of translation (that is, his/her ability to choose the communicatively appropriate equivalents) and the culture of translation (translational tradition) as it has historically evolved in the target culture. (For instance, the notion of equivalence changes from culture to culture and from one period to the next within the same culture. In some situations equivalence is pursued through literal translation and in others through free translation, and in yet others through modified literal or free translation. The translator must carefully gauge the prevailing attitude and be prepared to meet the – usually unconscious – expectations of his/her reading public. He may refuse to obey, but in this case the risk is his.)

The translator’s choice, or his/her strategy, is determined by his understanding of the communicative function of an element of source culture incorporated in the original message, his understanding of the position (value) of that element in the source culture, his knowledge of the contrastive relationships between the source and the target language, his knowledge of the translational traditions of the target culture, and his overall capability for cultural mediation (that is, for reducing the unknown cultural content to the known).

2.

Among the most important factors that guide the translator in selecting the procedures for the translation of unmatched elements of culture is their communicative function (i.e., their function in the particular context of situation in which translation takes place). This presupposes the translator’s ability to recognize and properly interpret the communicative function of such elements in the original message. In one context of situation, finding itself in the focus of communication, a given cultural element may participate in the act of communication with the full force of its semantic content, which requires a suitable cultural transfer in translation. In the following example, *Macy’s parade* is in focus and the Croatian translator felt duty bound to convey its semantic content to his receivers, which he did by means of a paraphrase in the body of the text and a definition at the bottom of the page:

(1) *Would she be able to take a little girl to Macy’s parade?*

Bi li mogla povesti malu djevojčicu na godišnju paradu robne kuće Macy’s?

The translation adds information to the effect that the parade is an annual event and that Macy’s is a department store. The footnote, labelled Translator’s Note, tries to capture the cultural significance of that item for members of the source culture and to fill the gap inevitably experienced by members of the target (Croatian) culture: “Macy’s, the largest department store in the world (occupying a whole city block in New York), has for forty years been staging a children’s parade on Thanksgiving Day (in late November), with huge balloons representing Popeye, Donald Duck, etc.”





In the following example, the same translator realized that the reference in the source text to another department store, cheap Woolworth, did not have the communicative weight that would require cultural transfer. The focus of communication in this example is not on the cultural traits of this particular department store but on the opposition between, metaphorically speaking, pure diamonds and glass bijouterie (of the kind sold in cheap stores):

- (2) ... – *so beautiful but distorted by rage – such a mixed mind of pure diamond and Woolworth glass.*
... – *tako lijepa ali izobličena mržnjom – tako mješoviti um, čisti dijamant i jeftine staklene drangulije.*

Woolworth glass is translated as *jeftine staklene drangulije* ‘cheap glass trinkets/knick-knack/bauble’, which does not attract the reader’s attention to the cultural difference between English and Croatian.

When a specific element of the source culture is merely a background against which communication takes place, the translator may decide that the most effective way of dealing with such an element is substitution (substituting target culture material for the unmatched source culture item), consciously sacrificing the “flavour” of the source culture in the interest of the unimpeded reception of the original sender’s communicational intention:

- (3) *Disguised as a Western Union messenger, he entered the bank and ...*
Prerušen u dostavljača brzjava, ušao je u banku i ...

In cases like the last two, the translator’s choice of the procedure of substitution becomes obvious if one takes a look at the alternative, that is, the preservation and faithful rendering of the source culture-specific element. In the first example, the translation would run something like this:

- (4) ... *čisti dijamant i staklene drangulije kakve se prodaju u jeftinim robnim kućama koje pripadaju lancu Woolworth.*

The translator may feel a need to add a note informing the reader that Woolworth is an American and international chain of department stores, which began in America in the second half of the nineteenth century and which initially sold all items at the uniform price of 5 cents (later extended to include also ten-cent items). In the second example, an attempt to preserve the source culture item in translation would yield the following result:

- (5) *Prerušen u dostavljača brzjava privatnog poduzeća za prijem i slanje brzjava Western Union, ušao je u banku i ...*



It is clear that in these examples little would have been gained if the cultural background against which the story develops had been preserved (since the full cultural impact of the kind experienced by the members of the source culture would not be achieved) and much would have been lost in terms of the ease of communication (since unusualness and novelty of the culture-specific content for the receiver would bring such content into the focus, which was not the original sender's intention).

The assessment of the communicative function of a given element of culture is made by the translator as a receiver (and may be wrong, or unacceptable to other receivers in the target culture). There are cases, however, in which the translator need not worry, because the communicative function is self-evident. Thus, in the following example, *hamburger joint* is clearly background (not focus) information, as the character enters the place not to eat a hamburger but to drink tea:

- (6) *He went past West End to Broadway, entering the first hamburger joint, sitting in the rear, and ordering tea.*
Prešavši West End, uputio se prema Broadwayu, ušao u prvi lokal, sjeo sasvim otraga, i naručio čaj.

3.

The translator's understanding of the value of an item in the source culture and its possible transfer to the target culture is the next factor that determines the choice of the translation procedure: *white tie* in the following example could easily be translated literally (*bijela kravata*), but in this case *white-tie parties* would yield *primanja s bijelim kravatama* ('receptions/parties with white ties') which does not have the same value in the target language and culture that its counterpart has in the source language and culture. The translator, therefore, rejected literal translation in favour of paraphrase ('elegant evening receptions/parties') as the procedure of choice in the following example:

- (7) *Amused, he saw how they would arrive at white-tie parties at the Hotel Pierre...*
Osmjehujući se u sebi, zamišljao je kako bi dolazili na otmjena večernja primanja u hotel Pierre...

In the example that follows, the cultural item *Edwardian* could easily be transferred by borrowing (edvardijanski), but the translator judged – correctly – that the cultural content would be non-transparent for non-Anglo Saxon receivers and he therefore supplied the time frame, 1910, at the expense of the designation of the style referred to. (Out of a number of Edwards, reference is here made to Edward VII, Queen Victoria's son, who ruled from 1901 to 1910.) It should be noted that the translator achieved only a partial cultural transfer: the receiver now knows that moustaches were trimmed and shaped in a



particular style around 1910 and that this style was somehow connected with a man called Edward, but he has no idea of what the Edwardian moustache actually looked like:

- (8) *Seeing you, your white turtle-necked shirt and dinner jacket, your Edwardian moustache, your damp lips,..*
Vidjevši Vas, Vašu bijelu dolčevitku i smoking, Vaše brkove u stilu 1910, vlažne usne,...

4.

Contrastive relations between the source and the target language also influence the translator's choice of the procedure in translating unmatched elements of culture. Some of the procedures are blocked and others are favoured by the existence of particular relations between the two languages. For instance, it is not very probable that Croatian will borrow the English expression *gilt-edged securities* (meaning very secure shares), because compound words are generally less likely to be borrowed than simple words; besides, the phonetico-, phonemico-, graphemic rules of Croatian would not easily accept the form *edžd* (or perhaps *eđđ*) as a modifier in the expression *gilt-edged*. Equally, some expressions can be easily borrowed in the nominative case but are very hard to manipulate in the oblique cases and various formations: for instance, even the more or less widely accepted *intervju* provokes an uneasy feeling when it needs to be pronounced or written in the locative singular (*u intervjuu*); while microfiche is easily borrowed as a noun *mikrofiš*, it is all but impossible in the attributive position, because it is not clear how an adjective form is to be built (*?mikrofiški*).

Borrowing can be blocked also for contrastive semantic reasons. Thus, for instance, the word *block* as a town-planning concept characteristic of the architectural practice in the United States cannot be used in Croatian in its otherwise acceptable form *blok*, since that semantic space is already taken up by the Croatian *blok* in the expression *stambeni blok*. Its use for the American *block* is ruled out because of the proximity of meanings, which might cause misunderstanding (Croatian *stambeni blok* is a single building, while the American *block* has a number of buildings on each side of the block). That is why the translator could not resort to borrowing in the following example and was forced to use other procedures, which he could do because that particular cultural element was not in the focus of communication but rather served as a back-drop against which the communication took place:

- (9) *The police had a picture of him and would arrest him if he was seen in the block.*
Policija je imala njegovu sliku i uhapsit će ga ako ga vide u blizini.
(10) *... to buy carton of Virginia rounds for his mother-in-law, Tennie, who lived a block away.*



... *da kupi šteku cigareta Virginia Rounds za punicu, Tennie, koja stanuje jednu ulicu dalje.*

The procedure of literal translation is blocked for semantic reasons when its use would produce undesirable results (for instance, if the American *high school*, which is a general secondary school, was translated as *visoka škola*, which is a post-secondary school or college, or if the Croatian *društveni radnik*, which is a public figure, were to be translated as *social worker*, or if *javno poduzeće* were to be translated as *public company*, which is a private *company* whose shares are traded on the stock market, so that everybody can buy them, instead of the correct translation *public enterprise* or *public corporation*), or if literal translation was semantically opaque and/or stylistically awkward (for instance, *leveraged buyout* could hardly be translated literally to give *upoluženi otkup, polužni otkup, otkup s polugom*).

5.

The translational tradition of the target culture significantly influences the translator's choice of the procedures for the translation of particular elements of culture. Even a superficial glance reveals that some languages accept foreign importations quite easily, while others seem to insist on their domestic replacements, or at least loan translations or calques. Somewhat less evident, but no less important, are the differences in the readiness of different cultures to accept translations as translations, tolerating small "infelicities"; some other cultures – generally, or in certain periods or segments (say, for non-literary translation or popular literature) – require translations which show no traits of their foreign cultural origins.

In order to incorporate his translation into the target culture, the translator must first of all know, and then also respect, the translational traditions of that culture. Unlike the factors discussed earlier, this factor does not influence each specific choice in a given case, but rather it works in a cumulative fashion. Therefore, the translator must bear it in mind at all times, though he does not need to follow it unexceptionally in each particular case. If the target language, for instance, does not like loan words, this is not to say that it will not tolerate a single loan; or if the translational tradition requires the source culture to be neutralized in translation, this is only meant as a general trend (which the translator may contravene at his own risk), but in each particular case he/she must decide whether it is communicatively more effective to follow this tradition, or whether it is perhaps better to preserve the originality of the source culture.

6.

The procedures discussed so far have been fragmentary statements that make up a larger whole – the translator's ability to communicate with the intention of achieving



cultural mediation. The translator's job is not linguistic mediation (*Sprachmittlung*), as is widely believed, but rather mediation in the act of communication, in which two cultures confront each other with their respective linguistic expressions. The context of situation in which the translational communication takes place is a cultural context in the broadest sense, as defined by Casagrande (1954: 338), for whom culture is superordinate to language and includes language. The other elements of the context of situation, apart from the source and the target language, include the extralinguistic content being communicated, then the original sender as a particular linguistic person, the translator as a receiver (and a particular linguistic person, speaker of the source language), the translator as a sender (and a particular linguistic person, speaker of the target language), the feedback relationship between the original sender and the translator as a receiver, the ultimate receiver as a particular linguistic person, speaker of the target language, and the feedback relationship between the translator as a sender and the ultimate receiver. All of these elements are, in the nature of things, cultural (or culture-determined), which proves that an act of translation is an eminently cultural act: it takes place within culture; it has a direct bearing on culture; and it helps to shape culture.

7.

The purpose of this paper has been to highlight this broader cultural aspect of translation, which – in addition to its practical importance – has serious implications for translation theory. Certainly, the problem of translation of cultural elements cannot be reduced to a taxonomy of phenomena whose failure to match causes a headache for the translator. It may be interesting to analyze unmatched elements of material culture, such as food, clothing, various artifacts, plants, animals, etc., and elements of spiritual culture, such as customs, beliefs, lifestyles, social organization, etc. (cf. Nida 1964: 55), in the light of the possible procedures available to the translator as he struggles to overcome the difficulties caused by the mismatch, but this is still far from a theoretical account of translation of unmatched elements of culture. To achieve that, we need to establish how the translator selects the procedure which will – in the particular context of situation – fulfil its communicative function. In doing this, he/she relies not only on the cultural content that needs to be transferred, but also on the function of this content in the act of communication, its expression in the source language, its possible (or otherwise) expression in the target language, and the translating tradition within which the translator is forced to operate.





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PREVOĐENJE KULTURE I KULTURNA PREVOĐENJA

Prevođenje nepodudarnih elemenata kulture suočava teoriju i praksu prevođenja s dva osnovna problema: (1) problem mogućih postupaka i (2) problem strategije, odnosno izbor postupka koji će najbolje odgovarati određenom komunikacijskom činu. Prvi je problem lakši od drugoga, budući da je popis mogućih postupaka (i njihovih kombinacija) finitan, a obuhvaća (a) posuđivanje, (b) definiciju i parafrazu, (c) doslovni prijevod, (d) supstituciju, (e) leksičku inovaciju, (f) dodavanje, (g) ispuštanje. Drugi je problem utoliko teži što pokreće šire pitanje kulture prevođenja. Prevoditeljeva je strategija determinirana njegovim poimanjem komunikativne funkcije elementa kulture koji treba prevesti u konkretnom kontekstu situacije, njegovom interpretacijom položaja (vrijednosti) toga elementa u izvornoj kulturi i mogućih pandana u ciljnoj kulturi, njegovim poznavanjem kontrastivnih odnosa između izvornog i ciljnog jezika, te njegovom sviješću o prevoditeljskoj tradiciji u ciljnoj kulturi.

