

ISSUES IN TRANSLATING CULTUREMES¹

Abstract: *This article aims at presenting some issues related to translating culturemes. The first part deals with defining key concepts such as culture, cultureme, and their relation to language and translation. A few examples of difficulties in translating culture-bound words will be presented in the second part of the paper.*

Keywords: *translation, culture, cultureme, adaptation*

DIFFICULTÉS DANS LA TRADUCTION DES CULTURÈMES

Résumé: *Cet article se propose de présenter quelques difficultés dans la traduction des culturèmes. La première partie sera consacrée à la définition des concepts-clés comme culture, culturème et leur relation avec la langue et la traduction. Quelques exemples de difficultés dans la traduction des termes à contenu culturel seront présentés dans la deuxième partie de l'étude.*

Mots-clés : *traduction, culture, culturème, adaptation*

Introduction

Translation and culture are two comprehensive interrelated concepts that have been intensely studied in recent decades from different perspectives in many fields of research. The reasons are multiple, one of them is that nowadays cultures are growingly brought into contact in every domain in our modern society. Economic, political, and social factors influence this increasing connection between cultures, civilisations, and languages. People are traveling more often than in the past from one country to another (for work, studies, leisure), they are easily communicating through technological communication tools. This need for communication between cultures is satisfied with the help of translation, which presupposes a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding, and en-coding to transfer, to transpose ideas, thoughts from one language to another.

The aim of this paper is to present a few issues in translating culture-bound words by putting into contrast some linguistic units in Romanian, French, and English. Key concepts such as culture, culturemes will be defined in the first part of the article. The second part will deal with a few examples of possible difficulties in translating culturemes to see what solutions can be found in such cases.

The concept of culture

The first step in our attempt to define the concept of culture is to see the explanations given by the dictionaries. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines culture as "the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group". The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as "the way of life, especially the general customs, and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time". What draws our attention here is "at a particular time", which underlines the temporary and evolving nature of the concept.

Encyclopaedia Britannica goes further by mentioning that culture is "behaviour peculiar to Homo sapiens, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behaviour. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools,

¹ Cristina Ilinca, University of Pitești, cristina.ilinca@upit.ro

techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements.” With this definition, culture makes the difference between *Homo sapiens* and all other species, therefore *Homo culturalis* is often used to characterize the human species: “*Homo culturalis* is above all else a meaning-seeking species whose hunger and search for meaning to its existence has led it to invent myth, art ritual, language, science, and all the other cultural phenomena that guide its search” (Danesi, Perron, 1999: IX). Research shows that cultures have ancient origins, the evidence discovered (planned hunting, jewelry, burial rituals, etc.) indicates the existence of early cultures at least 2.5 million years ago. The concept of culture has been thus the subject of study in many disciplines and research fields: paleontology, anthropology, history, philosophy, sociobiology, semiotics, etc.

To narrow our field of interest, we will mention here the definition given by Lederach (1995), according to whom “culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them” (p. 9).

We can conclude by saying that culture is a comprehensive concept that refers to patterns, norms, standards of thought, behaviour, social relations specific to a society, transmissible by tradition and communication, both diachronically and synchronically.

Language and culture

Analysing all these definitions, one can see that language plays an important part within a culture as the main way of communication between individuals, as a primary means through which knowledge, skills, traditions are codified and passed on from one generation to another. Language and culture are two interrelated concepts: both language and culture are learnt, they are not innate, they are transmitted through teaching or learning within a society/community/group, they are transmitted under the form of a code.

These remarks remind us of Humboldt's philosophy on language, according to which the essence of language is "to form thoughts out of materialistic world of things and phenomena. A functioning language tends to become formal, and given that the words replace things, the words, same as the matter, should get a form to which they will be subject to. Wherein the form is understood mentally or through the word itself, which is considered as a material" (2001, 315). For Humboldt, languages and cultures represent the spirit of a nation, therefore linguistic and cultural diversity shows the differences in the mental patterns, the conceptualisation of different peoples.

The concept of cultureme

This fact of transmitting, of communicating thought, knowledge, in a codified way, within a community, by symbols, leads to the idea that both language and culture are “two superimposed semiotic codes which interact, especially by means of figurative meanings and phraseologisms” (Pamies, 2017: 101), as “...special signs that can store and accumulate a rather significant amount of cultural knowledge and reflect through their images peculiar ways of national (or culture-bound) worldview of reality” (Zykova, 2016: 135).

In linguistics, several terms are used to designate these cultural-bounded signs: *cultural connotation* (Neo-Humboldtian linguo-culturological school of phraseologists) *cultural symbols* (Pirainen, 1998), *emblems* (Langlotz, 2006), *culturally-bound idioms* (Sabban, 2007, 2008), etc.

The field of translation studies prefers the term *cultureme* (Vermeer, 1983; Even-Zohar, 1998) to generally refer to any kind of “culture-marker” (Nord, 1994), “cultural reference” (Hurtado, 2001) or culturally loaded words (Galisson, 1991), cultural keywords (Wierzbicka, 1992; Goddard 2009), realia, cultural gaps. Considered as a bridge between

language and culture, culturemes can be generally defined as “the minimal, indivisible unit of culture: rituals, values and stereotypes” (Lem *apud* Jaskot & Ganoshenko, 2016:59).

Culturemes and translation

Since ancient times translation has been subject to many studies. Different perspectives can be noticed: some authors see the history of translation as practice, as opposed to the history of translation as theoretical reflection (Steiner, 1975), others write about the history of translation by linking it to its socio-political context (Santoyo, 1987). Some authors describe translation as a universal activity and commonly practiced in all languages and all cultures.

Starting with the second part of the XXth century, a systematic study of translation as a process and result can be remarked on. Different approaches to translation have been adopted over time, studying it from different points of view: linguistic, hermeneutic, ideological, poetical, textual, semiotic, communicative, cognitive, etc. In the 1990s, translation studies take a cultural turn, signaling a shift from a formalist approach to one that focuses more on extra-textual factors, on context, "what is studied is text embedded within its network of both source and target cultural signs." (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990: 11–12). In this context, the translator becomes a mediator between the cultures brought into contact, a vector of transmission of cultural knowledge from one linguistic community to another. In order to be able to transmit all the cultural richness through translation, the translator must not only know the standards, the values of the source culture and the target culture, but also respect the translation standards. It is important to highlight here that when translating, the translator brings in their linguistic culture, that is values, beliefs, attitudes inherited from their origin culture, which influences the translation process.

From a translational point of view, culturemes can be seen as units bearing specific cultural information which is recognizable by a group of people to be transferred from one language to another, for example, specific dishes, customs, currencies, units of measurement, geographical features. Adaptation seems to be the most appropriate method to translate culturemes since it involves changing the cultural reference of the source language into an equivalent from the target language.

At a linguistic level, many culturemes are represented by phraseological units. In this part of the paper, we aim at presenting some examples of linguistic forms of culturemes and their structure in Romanian, French and English to show some difficulties of adaptation that might arise in translation.

Some general cases can be identified:

A. The source unit is kept in the target language, accompanied by an explanation

This solution is very often used with linguistic units referring to gastronomic specificities and dishes, for instance. Generally, such units are kept in the target text to preserve the “flavour” of the source culture. For example, the Romanian *cozonac* designating a Romanian dessert, is usually maintained in translation, followed by an explanation (*gâteau marbré roumain, sweet bread*).

B. The source unit is translated by a unit containing elements that evoke a similar reality, from the same conceptual area, familiar to the target culture

For example, the Romanian expression *a face o mutră de doi coți*, where *cot* is an old unit of measurement used in Romania, whose length used to vary from one historical region to another (from 0.63 to 0.66 meters). A possible translation into French would be *faire une mine de dix pieds de long*, where *pied* is also a unit of measurement, corresponding to the English *foot* (0.30 meters). The English equivalent would be *to make a long face*, where

there is no specific unit of measurement used, just the adjective *long*, which renders the idea of length.

C. The source unit is neutralized by a heteronym in the target language, which cancels the connotations of the source unit.

Let's take the Romanian expression *a merge la ghiol*, where *ghiol* means a lake or pond full of mud, specific to the shores of the Black Sea and the Danube Delta in Romania, where people go mud-bathing. It could be translated into *prendre des bains de boue* (Fr.), *go mud-bathing* (Eng), more general expressions which are rather the equivalent of the Romanian expression *a face băi de nămol*.

There are linguistic units that depend strongly on the context in which they are used and whose transfer to another language can be problematic. For example, the Romanian expression *a fi luat din iele* which can be translated into French by *attraper une paralysie*, and in English by *to get paralysis*. *Iele* is a Romanian word referring to fantastic feminine creatures who show up the night of *Rusalii* which coincides with the day of Pentecost, a Christian holiday dedicated to the spirit of the dead, celebrated 50 days after Easter. The expression refers to a common superstition in Romania, according to which one gets paralysis if they step on the place these feminine creatures danced during the night of *Rusalii*/ Pentecost. In this case, the Romanian idiomatic expression seems to be untranslatable, its equivalents are not culture-bound units, its whole cultural connotation disappears through translation.

Conclusions

To sum up, we can say that translation does not only mean transposing a source text into a target text. A cultural approach to translation helps translators better understand the source text, identify possible difficulties in understanding and transposing it into the target language, do more research which may reveal unknown meanings, and provide them with more profound insights and better translation solutions. Both language and culture are two comprehensive concepts, subject to evolution over time and space, inexhaustible sources of information and inspiration, and a constant challenge for both professional and apprentice translators.

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Cristina **ILINCA**, Associate Professor, Phd, at the University of Pitesti, Romania. She teaches translation theory and practice, corpus linguistics, and technical-scientific translation. Her latest research focuses on translation and terminology.