

THE DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATION: THE TECHNICAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES OF RENDERING TEXTS

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The work of a translator is a complicated process. Translation is more than just the transposition of words from one language to another; it is a calculated art and a delicate science requiring thorough investigation and cultural awareness.

It is possible to explore the challenges of translation at different levels. Consider the word level; the difficulty of finding the most 'appropriate' equivalent in the target language lies within the various semantic possibilities carried by a single word. A translator should not fall victim to the 'translation fallacy,' the idea that each word has a one to one correlation with another word in a foreign language just because occasionally the meanings coincide. A good translator should take into account all semantic variants. Take the various possible meanings of the English noun 'school':

1. An academic educational institution; the edifice of such an institution.
Example: 'middle school'
2. A skill achieving something, an experience, but also, providing some kind of skill or experience.
Example: 'to go to a good school in the army'
3. Direction within the fields of the sciences or the arts.
Example: 'the Repinskaya school of painting'
4. A system of obligatory exercises (in figure skating)
Example: 'skating school'

Moving to the sentence level, it is important to consider a wide range of transformations. Transformations are specific changes addressing some grammatical, semantic or syntactic difference between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). The most common transformations at the sentence level are the following:

- 1) omission, 2) addition, 3) transposition, 4) change of grammatical forms, 5) loss compensation, 6) concretization, 7) generalization, 8) antonymic translation, 9) meaning extension, 10) metonymic translation, 11) sentence integration, and 12) sentence fragmentation.¹

To further explore the challenges presented by transformations, let us consider a few examples.

Omission (опущение)

Occasionally the content of a text in the SL may include information that simply has no semantic value in the TL. That is, certain information in the SL will in no way aid the translation into the TL. Consider:

Summer rains in Florida may be violent, while they last.

Летом во Флориде бывают сильные ливни.¹

In Russian, the English clause ‘while they last’ adds nothing to the utterance, but rather would only be superfluous. It is therefore unnecessary to translate it, and so the absence of this clause in the translation into the TL is a case of omission.

In other situations, a translator may need to add to the text in the TL in order to clarify meaning.

Addition (добавление)

Certain words or clauses within the SL may contain information that is not accessible in the TL without some further clarification. Consider the following:

The policeman waved me on.¹

In Russian, the concept of a wave simultaneously signifying permission does not exist in such a concise phrase. The Russian translation must include more information that is present in the SL:

Полицейский помахал мне рукой, показывая, что я могу проезжать.

Полицейский рукой просигналил (показал), что я могу проезжать.

Omission and addition, being transformations, are rather technical elements of the translation process, and while grammar, syntax, and vocabulary are all extremely important, what about cultural content? Take, for example, the Russian diminutive suffix; context and pragmatics play an integral role in the interpretation of the suffixes, carrying them out of the realm of quantity versus quality.

‘Супчик’, the diminutive of ‘суп’, ‘soup’ can be taken at a superficial level to indicate ‘a little soup’ when used in isolation. But because diminutives are most common in spoken language, it is nearly impossible to ignore the pragmatic element of diminutive use. ‘Супчик’ in an actual utterance, say, a mother to her child, takes on a new level of semantic value; ‘хочешь супчик?’ expresses affection.

This semantic value must be considered through framing; we must credit the environment in which the utterance occurs. “The meaning of the suffixes is influenced by the character of the base stem to which they adhere (lexical factor), the broader linguistic context in which they appear (textual factor) and their relationship to the units of the discourse situation.”²

The concept of framing is further complemented by yet another linguistic theory which argues for the existence of a ‘slice of culture’ within words and morphemes. Charles Fillmore, an American linguist, offers the compelling paradigm of frame semantics to examine word meanings. “Words represent categorizations of experience, and each of these categories is underlain by a motivating situation occurring against a background of knowledge and experience.”³

In this way, the versatility of Russian nouns and their suffixes is easier to define. If all nouns inherently implicate an idea or emotion that corresponds to the culture in which they are uttered, then suffixes bring their own ‘slice of culture’ to adjust the preexisting emotional quality.

Beyond the realm of the technicalities of grammar and syntax or the cultural content of morphemes, it is important to consider the kind of language used. A translator must preserve the meaning and culture, but likewise the style and mood of a text. Literary language presents its own difficulties; a translator must join artistic style with the technical, semantic and cultural requirements of translation.

Consider the following excerpt from Dmitry Vykov:

«Так окончилась его прежняя жизнь, еще теплившаяся среди голода, но погибшая среди нэпа; он, разумеется, еще надеялся, ибо надежда умирает последней, но уже почти не думал, не читал и не разговаривал с сугробами. Город зарастал лавками. Кумача не стало меньше, но он словно промаслился.» 4

Here a translator must consider the style of the text, but likewise remember that certain unique Russian concepts must be explained within an English-speaking cultural framework. Take the following words:

Нэп

Лавка

Кумача

All of these words refer to concepts of the Soviet era and therefore are culturally charged. Taking the acronym 'Нэп' and translating it in its full form is a possible manner of achieving better clarity without extensive explanation. 'Лавка' in its most basic sense is a small shop or even stall, but in the wake of the Soviet era, such shops were unique in the sense that signalled the change in government legislation. People were permitted to open private business, and so the simple translation 'shop' is insufficient in carrying this historical and social connotation. Finally, 'кумача' is more than simply 'ribbon,' and likewise has a political charge. Such a word is linked to the ubiquitous Soviet era bunting that represented the Communist Party. 'Ribbon,' therefore is inadequate in and of itself, so adding an element of color (red) and the suggestion of political significance (bunting) can help to express this idea without extensive explanation.

A proposed translation:

“And so ended his former life, still glimmering amidst the famine, but dying in the wake of the New Economic Policy; he of course, continued hoping, for hope dies last, but he already barely thought, barely read and barely conversed with the snowdrifts. The city was overgrown with small independent shops. The red bunting didn't decrease, but rather spread like fungus.”

In conclusion, translation is a process that is greater than words. Cultural, emotional, even historical elements must be considered alongside grammatical and syntactic elements in order to render the most accurate and natural translation. A translator must be sensitive to semantic subtleties and work to achieve a balance between the TL and SL that expresses all the technical, cultural and stylistic qualities of a text.

Endnotes

1. Burak A.L. "Translating Culture. Translation and Cross-Cultural Communication. Stage 1: Word semantics." Moscow: R.Valent Publishing House, 2002, 2005
2. Volek, Bronislava. Linguistic & Literary Studies in Eastern Europe: Emotive Signs in Language and Semantic Functioning of Derived Nouns in Russian, page 56. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987.
3. Fillmore, Charles J. "Frame Semantics." Cognitive Linguistics: basic readings, page 373. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter GmbH & Co. K.G., 2006.

4. Bykov, Dmitry. Ostromov, or the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Moscow: Prozaik, 2012.