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Some aspects of translating history

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Some Aspects of Translating History

Abstract

The article entitled ***Some Aspects of Translating History*** initiates linguistic reflection over issues connected with contemporary translation of historical texts. Many challenges, as the authors emphasize, are not only connected with specificity of translation of historical texts such as, for example, the phenomenon of equivalence, understood in the article in a cognitive aspect, thereby taking into account the possibilities and limits of human cognition. Another issue presented by the authors and at the same time basic for the translation of historical texts, is the necessity to retain the axiological sense of the translated text. A translation should, therefore, render positive in its intentions and effects evocation of historical events but also, an implicitly intended manipulation of the original text. Analyzing specific cases connected with translation of history the authors point out both, positive in its effect cases of reference to historical memory and manipulation with regard to the original text.

Key words: cognitive, translation, history, domestication, axiology

Abstrakt

Artykuł ***Some Aspects of Translating History*** inicjuje językoznawczą refleksję nad zagadnieniami związanymi z współczesnym przekładem tekstów historycznych. Wiele wyzwań, jak podkreślają autorzy, wiąże się nie tylko ze specyfiką przekładu tekstów historycznych, jest nim, na przykład, zjawisko ekwiwalencji, rozumiane w artykule w ujęciu kognitywnym, a więc uwzględniającym możliwości i granice ludzkiego poznania. Innym zagadnieniem, poruszonym przez autorów, a zarazem podstawowym dla tłumaczenia tekstów historycznych, jest konieczność zachowania aksjologicznego wydźwięku tłumaczonego tekstu. Tłumaczenie oddawać powinno więc pozytywne w intencjach i skutkach przywoływanie zdarzeń historycznych ale także,

przykładowo, implicytnie zamierzoną manipulację oryginalnego tekstu. Analizując konkretne przypadki związane z tłumaczeniem historii, autorzy zarówno wskazują na pozytywne w skutkach przypadki powoływania się na pamięć historyczną ale i na manipulacje w stosunku do oryginału.

Słowa kluczowe: kognitywny, tłumaczenie, historia, domestykacja, aksjologia

0. Preface

Both fields, i.e. history and translation, are extremely well described and characterized in the history of scholarship. History was one of the first branches which emancipated from philosophy. Translating was a necessity in context of contacts between and among different nations and cultures. The next reason for the development of the art of translation and translation account was a need of translation of books regarded as holy, e.g. Rigveda, The Bible.

There is no need to present here characterizations of the branch of history. There are many dimensions of study in the field. We will devote some space to certain aspects of translating theory with special attention toward translating historical texts.

1. Rudiments of translation

Theoreticians of translation consider many issues connected with relations between source and target languages. In the following section we will present a few.

1.1 Translation and equivalence

Although accounts of translation connected with the trend of Translation Studies (Snell-Hornby, 2006) do not accept the notion and the role of equivalence in translation, we will reconsider the notion useful in translating history and other fields. We also disagree with the proponents of Translation Studies who claim that linguistics is irrelevant for translation. Generally, we follow the cognitive view of translation as maintained

in Hejwowski (2004a; 2004 b). We will also stress faithfulness in translation, especially in science and scholarship. Additionally we share the view of Simon Dik (1997), the late functional linguist, who highlights pragmatics as a dominating factor in an analysis of an utterance. Semantics is a subordinate component to pragmatics, whereas semantics in turn is a dominating factor with respect to syntax.

In translating history, syntactic correspondence is of little importance. However, if it is possible to preserve a syntactic structure of an utterance from L1 (source language) to L2 (target language) without any loss, then there is no reason for lack of preservation of such structure. We would like to repeat that this kind of preservation is rather of cosmetic character. Nevertheless, there are theories which favor syntactic over semantic equivalence, e.g. Nida (1964) and his formal equivalence theory. Semantics is crucial in faithfulness of representation of historical facts and interpretation. We should also devote some attention to pragmatics and history.

1.1.1 Pragmatics and history

We accept here the teleological concept of pragmatics which is associated with a slogan: *how to get things done by verbal means*. Therefore, one aspect of relation between pragmatics and history is concerned with the intentions of state persons in attempts to accomplish certain goals (e.g. Churchill's memoirs). Definitely, such intentions should be preserved in translating an utterance from L1 to L2. Intentions may be expressed directly, indirectly or may be highly improbable to detect. A skillful translator of a historical text should account for the above difficulty. The preservation of the level of directness is very important here, however, the preservation of intention in general is even more significant.

1.1.2 Axiological aspects of translating history

Another aspect of the relation between expressions in L1 and L2 may be called axiological. Positive evaluation should be rendered as positive and negative as negative. Here a translator should maintain different opinions from the author of a historical work even he/she is in conflict of values with the author's stance. It happened that the translation was axiologically coherent but there was a series of arguments against such axiological attitude in a footnote. A translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is a case in point.

Often history is used as a weapon in political fights. There is even a term in Polish, *polityka historyczna* i.e. historical policy. The enterprise itself is to be condemned ethically. History stops to be a scholarly discipline but becomes means of manipulation of a political regime or a party to justify certain ethically doubtful activities. In the seventies of the last century a communist party daily in Poland *Trybuna Ludu* (*People's Tribune*) came with the following translation from one of the leading British newspapers: *Andrew Scargil został człowiekiem roku w Wielkiej Brytanii*. The original was *Andrew Scargil became the man of the year in Great Britain and Margaret Thatcher became the woman of the year*. The manipulation of Polish readers is a shameful one. Firstly, the second part of the sentence with Margaret Thatcher is omitted, secondly, *man* is used in a generic sense, i.e. human being but not in a male gender sense. Sometimes historical policy is used in an intentionally positive sense where the purpose of such activities is noble and the main aim of such activity is to preserve and highlight some historical facts which are misinterpreted and/or forgotten by politicians from some other countries, e.g. reminding the Russian society of Katyń's genocide or recalling the fact that only Poles were condemned to death by the Nazis for helping Jews

during World War II and not any other citizens in any other country were threatened this way.

However, historical policy intentionally avoids mentioning shameful facts like Polish military annexation of Czech Zaolzie in 1938 taking advantage of Hitler's annexation of Austria and other countries. Therefore, historical policy is not a good tool for presenting historical pragmatics and history in general. We will call **historical memory**, the positive aspect of reminding of crucial, important historical events and their scientific interpretations.

1.2 Cognitive extension of equivalence in translating historical text

Hejwowski (2004a; 2004b) views translation not as an operation on text but as an operation on minds understood as virtually projected minds of an author and a receiver. The main goal of cooperation is the receiving of maximally close reaction with respect to a text.

Here we have to deal with the extension of equivalence beyond language and text. Equivalence is centered on human abilities and limitations in production of text and their recognition. In such an account, the concept of equivalence is important again linking human cognitive abilities. Intercultural cognitive cooperation connected with producing an understanding of text (in our case historical text) is a great challenge varied with respect to cultural similarity or difference, e.g. Degrelle's and Zukov's reports on World War II. Degrelle's report is different from Zukov's since the Belgian officer took part as a soldier in battles, whereas Zukov was a strategic general not taking part as a frontline soldier. In Degrelle's opinion German and Belgian soldiers were treated as arbiters of nobility and virtues. His vision of Russian soldiers was disparaging, whereas Zukov was praising those soldiers especially those representing NKVD.

Cognitive background framing is very different for various readers, therefore reactions to historical texts may be impossible to reach the goal of maximally similar perception. The ideal translator of a historical text should be blind to attitudes, political convictions and even historical traditions. Secondly, he/she should avoid taking sides and should focus on accurate translation account.

The reception (of readers) of historical texts should not be the translator's concern at any point. Even if the text is offensive to many readers, the translator should avoid an intervention in the axiological picture of the text. A text of historic value should be treated with special care. It is recommendable to adjust the language in L2 to the epoch of the creation of the text in L1. When mistakes are noted, the translation of the text in L2 should not contain a blunt correction of those mistakes, although footnotes could contain such information, i.e. erroneous use of language or misrepresentation of the content.

Cognitive equivalence is then a very complex concept embracing many variables such as author of the text, recipient, physical-linguistic context, evaluation of events, determination of cause-effect relation and the like. Therefore determination of a cognitive set of prototypical features or building ICM (Idealized Cognitive Model) is a very ambitious task. However, an analysis would rather refer to a concrete historical text and its translation, e.g. Trevelyan's *History of England* and its Polish translation or *God's Playground* by Norman Davies and its translation by Elżbieta Tabakowska. Mentioning the last work we should note that its translation is done with expertise. Nevertheless, insisting on faithfulness of translation we may object to the translation of the title of the book by Norman Davies. The original title is *God's Playground*. Tabakowska translates it as *Boże igrzysko*. The problem with the translation of Davies' title is that *igrzysko* does

not exist in the singular number in Polish. It is a *pluralia tantum* noun e.g. *igrzyska olimpijskie* 'Olympic games'. *Igrzysko* in singular is presented only once in Polish by a famous sixteenth century poet Jan Kochanowski but to our knowledge it was never mentioned later. Apart from *pluralia tantum*, *igrzysko* does not signal a limited space which is to represent the area(s) of Poland. The equivalence *boisko*, *plac zabaw* or *podwórko* would represent better, to our contention, the image of the area where God had his pleasure to play various games. Thus we suggest again that when there is a possibility of translating a word, a phrase, or utterance in the most common and uncontroversial way, we should do so. *Boże igrzysko* may be a more sophisticated title because of the uniqueness of *igrzysko* in Polish but the original *playground* is neither rare nor sophisticated. The above issue leads us to concrete cases showing particular problems in translating historical texts.

2. Cases creating problems in translating history

In the next section we will discuss some problems which seem to be most transparent in translation. The problems are especially salient when the subject of translated text is history.

2.1 Domestication and foreignization

A translation of the English term *villeins* by the translator of Trevelyan's seminal *History of England* into *villeni* suggests foreignization:

Original: 138 Knights and Villeins of the Manor

Polish translation: 183 Rycerze i villeni manoru.

In the Polish translation we have in brackets a translator's explanation a *villein* is *chłop pańszczyźniany* i.e. a peasant dependent on his lord. *Villein* after undergoing vowel mutation into *villain* (*villein* exists no longer) in contemporary English is a *Schwarzcharacter* i.e. a bad person, a wrongdoer. That

is why such translation causes problems. If we have the explanation in brackets, then the question arises whether we really need the word *villeni* in Polish, especially that the word did not enter Polish vocabulary and it is debatable whether it entered specialized historical vocabulary. The word was introduced as early as in 1965. We can understand the translator's strategy. First of all *chłop pańszczyźniany* constitutes a heavier phrase to operate with than *villein*. Secondly, two foreign successive words *villeni manoru* seem to sound better than *chłopi pańszczyźniani z manoru*. Thirdly, once *villein* was established in Polish as a term, then it could be used many times without further troubles. However, *chłop* without *pańszczyźniany* seems to be a better choice in every context since it is understood by any native speaker of Polish.

Let us pass on to *manor*, which means *dwór* in Polish. There are at least two possibilities of translating *manor* into Polish. Firstly, English *manor* is rendered as *manor* in Polish as done by the translator. Secondly, it may be translated easily as *dwór*. Thus *villeni z dworu* is one of the possibilities of rendering the whole of the above phrase. The result is rather awkward since we have two uneven elements present in the translation: foreignization of the first element and domestication of the second. We have already mentioned the foreignization of both elements which is a choice made by a translator. The final possibility involves double domestication, i.e. *chłopi pańszczyźniani z dworu*. The final possibility seems to be the most fortunate since the distance between *villein* and *chłop pańszczyźniany* and also between *manor* and *dwór* is not big. Therefore, domestication level is not very high and the understanding of the message in the target culture causes no problems contrary to *villeni z manoru*.

This proposal seems to be legitimate and accurate since most of translation theoreticians see the process of foreignization as a dodge form of the proper

translation. Translation theoreticians like Venuti (1995) claim that using foreignization is an easy attempt to avoid cultural research of the target language. Domestication, on the other hand, is viewed by many scholars, e.g. Hejwowski (2004a and b), as a process of narrowing and limitation in acquiring foreign culture/knowledge by a target reader.

Therefore it may be claimed that foreignization is a transfer of comprehension from the translator to the reader who is supposed to work himself/herself on understanding of elements of foreign culture. Domestication in turn reminds us of spoon feeding. The majority of work concerned with adaptation of foreign culture to home culture is provided by the translator and the reader has no problems in understanding cultural elements because they are not there.

2.2 Necessary and unnecessary extensions and explanations in translation

Sometimes in historical (but not only) texts which were translated we may observe the need of the translator to maximize the explanatory role of the translation, namely the need of describing cultural phenomena which may be vaguely or may not be at all recognized in the target culture. Trying to avoid footnotes which are often regarded as the last resort, translators sometimes add in the target text some extra words (explanatory extensions) in order to describe the potentially difficult word with more precision. This method works quite handsomely when the semantically difficult lexical item is not supported by a context in the text and thus is not fully transparent. For instance, the word *kosynier*, which means a foot soldier equipped with a scythe as a main weapon, probably needs some sort of extension or extra explanation. We may translate *kosynier* as a *soldier with a scythe* which seems to be a perfectly acceptable solution. We may also put a wider explanation in a footnote which should also be

a satisfactory method in this particular case. It should then depend freely on a translator which solution is more suitable and more convenient for the reader. The use of extensions is also legitimate concerning more common words (without proper context) like *senate*, e.g. *American senate*, *Polish senate* etc. However, sometimes the aforementioned need of extended explanation may be illusive itself and lead to unnecessary changes in the text which may even distort the very process of reading. Examples like: *American Pentagon*, *Spanish Conquistador* etc. show that problem transparently. Needless to say, almost every civilized person on earth knows that there is only one *Pentagon* and it is definitely American. We deal with the same situation with respect to the word *Conquistador*. Examples like these can be multiplied almost endlessly. In a case like this again a cognitive approach seems to be important and adequate. As was mentioned, the cognitive perspective in translation focuses mainly on the mind not on the text itself. That implies various reader's reactions to implemented methods of additional extensions and explanations. Some of them may even be very negative (if the linguistic phenomenon is obvious and transparent and needs no additional explanation) from irritation through frustration to anger. Therefore dealing with explanatory extensions and other forms of explanations in the process of translation, we must remain linguistically aware with special emphasis on semantics. Common sense comes in handy in such situations as well.

3. Conclusions

In the article we wanted to pinpoint the most important aspects connected with translating historical texts. Many problems which are encountered are of a wider scope and are not limited to historical texts only. Such phenomena as faithfulness or equivalence are present in the majority of texts. Equivalence is

understood here as a cognitive phenomenon connected with human minds. Another problem that is crucial for translating historical (and also other) texts is the preservation of the axiological attitude in corresponding utterances in L1 and L2. Axiology is also connected with historical policy. We treat this procedure as a negatively conceived activity used for manipulation. Sometimes, however, reminding of certain historical events or situations has a positive intention and result. We name such situations **historical memory**.

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