

SOME SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS AND PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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Abstract. *The authors of the present contribution wanted to capitalize on their experience in working on specialized, interdisciplinary translations. They intended the paper as an illustrative glimpse of a number of theoretical and practical aspects of the arduous way to adequacy (in point of semantics, structure, function and style) translations aim at in the texts needed by the academic researchers' activity. Such issues were sketchily presented as: the mutual relationship between translation and translation studies, and interdisciplinarity, the role of the translator/interpreter as an intermediary between the cultural worlds in contact, the pressure of the specialized term in specialized translations, some of the main obstacles to appropriateness. Various examples of distortion and mistranslation were provided, including barbarisms and calked terms.*

Keywords: *communication, translation, cross-cultural communication distortion, barbarisms, appropriateness, interdisciplinarity.*

To say that communication has always been an important need of all societies is a sheer truism. One of the commonest definitions of communication describes it as a process by means of which information is enclosed in a package, then conveyed through a channel and passed on by a sender to a recipient via a certain medium; it is in fact one of the many such definitions currently used in order to conceptualize the processes by which people assign and exchange meaning.

Communication essentially means transferring information from one entity to another. The process relies on a sign-mediated interaction between at least two agents, who share a repertoire of signs and semiotic rules: it is the exchange of ideas, information, etc. between two or more people. The main elements underlying the act of communication are usually one speaker or sender / transmitter, the message being transmitted, and a person (or several persons) for whom this message is intended, i.e. the recipient / receiver. Communication can be seen as a mechanical process – a message is constructed / created and encoded by a sender, conveyed through a channel, then received and decoded by a receiver. The basic elements circumscribing the field of the communication theory are best expressed by Lasswell's maxim: "who says what to whom through what channel, and with what effect". Out of the three major types of communication (verbal, i.e. through dialogue / conversation – be it interpersonal or public speaking–, non-verbal – sending and receiving wordless messages –, and visual – through visual aids), the most important is of course the verbal type. Language being an instrument of communication, it will be redundant to say that speech has the central role in communication. In the process of communication, the *message* is at the very centre.

Incidentally, the human communication system has a lot in common with the animal one, the essential difference being their respective degrees of complexity and organization. The diversity and richness of human messages are indeed outstanding; unlike animal "language" systems (animals can transmit an unlimited number of signals, every message representing a mere variant of a single message schema), languages enable humans to convey well-formed sentences without ever ending the number of the possible well-formed sentences in the respective idiom: so, a human speaker may benefit by an unlimited number of discrete (linguistic) signals. When words and sentences are used in communication, they combine to make meaning in different ways. *Novelty* can be considered the key word when referring to human (linguistic) communication, as human languages are "open-ended", consisting of sets, and generating (possible) messages, whose number is actually infinite / unlimited: people can talk freely about virtually anything, and new items are permanently being introduced, borrowed or coined; it is, of course, novelty of meaning, not (usually) of structure. In most cases though, communication can also be understood as the exchanging of understanding.

In addition to common oral and written communication, researchers also define organisational communication (commonly studied as a subfield of the larger discipline of communication studies); it deals with the analysis and criticism of the role of communication in organizational contexts. Since communication is absolutely essential to organizations, the main focus of their communication (and researchers') endeavours has turned, since the 1980s, to prevalently business-oriented approach to communication.

In today's world, probably the most common type of communication is business communication, as used in presentations, meetings, socializing, small talk, correspondence, report writing, recruiting and applying for jobs, etc. Business communication has developed considerably in the area of mass communication media. The business articles in newspapers and magazines, as well as their readership, have greatly increased. The most mobile vocabulary compartment in the business areas includes economic, commercial and political terms. Such terms and phrases (and sometimes even structures) become increasingly better known, and also used in a proliferating manner.

On the other hand, both people of the same culture and language, and people belonging to different cultures communicate among them. It is true that intercultural communication, occurring between people of different cultural backgrounds, poses more problems than communication between people belonging to the same cultural background. Someone's cultural conventions and expectations play a vital role in the interpretation of the other's speech; when those cultural conventions are wide apart, disruptions (such as misunderstanding and

misinterpretation) will more often than not arise, or there may even occur total breakdown of communication. Intercultural / cross-cultural communication studies the way people coming from different cultural backgrounds communicate, as well as the way people try to communicate across cultures, paying attention to the degree of similarity between the manners of communication employed. Most specialists in the field emphasize the significance of *expression*. In fact, the message and the “package” are articulated as one entity. The construction of the message and the message itself are performed within a historical context. Some others say that there even exists a ritual process of communication exists, which can hardly be separated from a particular historical and social context.

In the same connection, translation is one of the many ways in which human communication has taken place for thousands of years. It has always played a central role in human interaction – and, indeed, translation can be defined in terms of communication. The translator has the role of transferring information from one language – the source language, to another – the target language. Today translation gains importance within the process of communication between the representatives of different linguistic communities. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that translators and interpreters, both professional and amateur, have played a significant part in the evolution of national languages and modern cultures.

The growing interrelationship linking people and places in the current global world highlights the visibility of translation as a means of circulating knowledge across both linguistic and political frontiers. That contributes to a better awareness of the issues of worldwide reciprocal influencing, better knowledge among individuals and groups, better efficiency of the exchanges of ideas in the most variegated domains of human knowledge. Although its fundamental merit in the circulation of that stream of ideas, which is essential for today’s society, is hardly recognized for its genuine value, translation unfolds vigorously in various senses, helping, among other things, to generate instruments of international cooperation and regulation, supported by transnational interaction in the domains of scientific research, world trade, placement of informatics programmes, etc.

The translator, before being a “writer” as such, is primarily a “message conveyor.” In most cases, translation is to be understood as the process through which a message expressed in a specific source language is linguistically transformed in order to be understood by readers of the target language. The essential task in the process is preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences. By rendering a source language (SL) text in a target language (TL) text, one has to ensure that the surface meaning of the two is approximately similar, and the structure of the SL is preserved as closely and accurately as possible. Therefore, no particular adapting work is usually required from the translator, whose work essentially consists of conveying the meaning expressed by the original writer.

Felicitously understanding and rendering the terms and phrases subject to the transfer of the message from the

source-text to the target-text means felicitously “transplanting” various language items out of their linguistic nativeness. Hence, the process of translation is a highly complex undertaking, as it involves a lot of qualities and (specific) skills. The translator’s work can become extremely difficult if one considers the fact that he/she has to cope with various problems arising from the divergences of the respective languages, whether in point of grammar, or lexical and stylistic structures and conventions. Moreover, the translator/interpreter must intermediate between the cultural worlds in contact, and not merely “transliterate” – be it in an informative manner – written or oral messages. Thus, translation is an intelligent activity, and it requires creative problem-solving in ever novel textual, social and cultural conditions. A real / good translator seems never to get bored, he/she is never inactive or routine-ridden.

Though the study of translation has traditionally been anchored in the combined established practices of both linguistics and literary studies, it is significantly (and qualitatively) more than that. One may suspect of utter self-flattery those experts in the field of translation who say it is both an art and a science; some define translation as a craft; Eugene Nida says it is a science, Mounin thinks it is an art, whose foundation is thoroughly scientific (comparable, for instance, to the scientific study undertaken by medicine).

In this connection, the concept of re-writing an original text will be in order. The action performed by a translator / interpreter is relatable to the whole of a text rather than to fragments of it, or else to particular words selected out of it. The text represents a *communicative unit*, significantly including particles of cultural information – and a good translator should be familiar with that aspect of a text, as well. Besides being familiar with, and quite proficient in, the source and the target languages, the translator must thoroughly know the *purpose* of the communication and the audience in order to achieve effective cross-cultural communication. Hence it appears the need for a good command of both the SL and the TL. Moreover, a fair amount of sensitivity to differences between cultures is necessary in order to successfully conduct business communication in situations such as meetings, direct or indirect negotiation and writing commercial letters.

Mistranslations, especially when frequent / current (or generalized), jeopardize both the rendered meaning, and the “hygiene” of the target-language itself. Distortions of every kind must be avoided, reduced or eliminated; that is to say that the major differences between the original and the received messages are to be eliminated. It follows that a set of special techniques are actually needed to avoid the difficulties that appear in the process of translation. Since the reality of multidisciplinary translation is very complex, the needs, problems and challenges that a translator has to face when translating specific documents are innumerable and rather hard to deal with.

In addition, translation studies – and translation itself, as a specific human activity – are naturally connected with the idea of *interdisciplinarity*. As a matter of fact, communication itself furthers interdisciplinary progress. More and more intercultural bridges increase the need for ever new interdisciplinary approaches, where the

humanity's hopes for solving some of the world's social predicaments lie. Globalization keeps challenging the older inter-discipline boundaries, and the fact is all the more evident in the field of social sciences. In the process, the role played by translation is not only that of an intermediary, but also that of an own source of new vistas and methods, established by the permanent contact with the other disciplines of human knowledge.

Virtually everybody today agrees that translation has a natural – or “genetic” calling for multi- and inter-disciplinarity. Actually, the very development of translation studies as an academic domain embraced a variety of sources, and continues to encompass various sub-competences and methodological and applicative models. The part it plays can only be understood in close connection with its natural flexibility, which allows it to unfold across and through textual, discourse or thematic realities characterizing its social function. Its natural supplement is, of course, scientific rigour and accuracy, or at least the aspiration to attain such accuracy effectively.

On the other hand, it will be fair to admit that knowing, being familiar with, or proficient in, most of the fields of today's scientific and cultural concerns is no easy job. A translator must possess, to a significant extent, interdisciplinary overall culture. Of course, good dictionaries and lexical-grammatical corpora are always there to assist one, as translation work instruments – but it is a fact that the sense of coordination and the accurate discrimination of detail must belong to the translator himself/herself. Specialists – i.e. qualified, experimented experts in the field – typically possess genuine propriety of the terms utilized, in both the SL and the TL; when such people are not sure about the exact meaning of a word or phrase, they look them up in good, or technically appropriate dictionaries: consequently, they will be able to employ them in a conscious manner, while appropriately contextualizing them.

Translation of legal texts, for example, allows but little space for rewriting and adaptation; translating, for instance, leasing or insurance contracts has little if anything to do with style: the user / reader actually wants to have as faithful a text as possible – which essentially implies semantics, not usually style and register. On the other hand, there are texts that massively require an “active communication” approach – thus, the very wording of the original text is the crux – but this rewording should be done cautiously and subtly. This may function as yet another piece of evidence to the fact that the translator is not essentially an *author*, but a *message conveyor*. Though the translator is an individual who significantly contributes to the end-product (and, in a way, we can say that his/her work is conducted in close cooperation with the original writer), he/she is a self-effacing person, who “naturally takes cover”, as it were, behind someone else's text.

When the proficiency of the translators is relatively (or drastically) limited, there are major risks for the correct / faithful translation, i.e. the suitable text needed for an appropriate, efficient communication.

The range of the types of mistranslation, or of the cases of infelicitous or (grossly) approximate rendition is however alarmingly broad: in the field of Anglo-Romanian translation, for instance, there are plenty of translation

variants that circulate sheer mistakes, barbarisms and Anglicised clichés, improprieties, some of which are genuine howlers. Such errors variously betray lack of empathy with either the text or the context, lack of logical thinking or of insight into the SL text, poor knowledge of the vocabulary of both English and Romanian, or blatant lack of nuance in thinking and expression. Paradoxically enough, many professional translators sin against the accuracy of the rendered text by ignoring many of the commonest False Friends / Deceptive Cognates, which even undergraduates should be familiar with.

More often than not, usages and idioms (or else, various other linguistic stock components and habitudes of a diverse nature – e.g. collocation) from the SL can be “spilled over” into the TL. (Though, paradoxically enough, inter-linguistic “spillages” can at times be conducive to something useful – a number of calques and loanwords being imported into the TL, which previously lacked a certain concept or a convenient expression for a concept). Some examples (mostly taken from the domain of economics) will be in order for the current status of Romanian neology. (1) Terms that sound foreign, and still are felt by specialists as being useful: *barteriza / barterizare, cash forward, contracte futures, floor broker, franchiser, franchising, full-cost, hedging, interdelivery spread, spread, stand-by, strategia win-win, swap*. (2) Words and phrases taken over by contemporary Romanian – some of which stand a fair chance of being integrated into the (broader) common vocabulary: *barter, brainstorming, broker, cash, clearing, holding, leasing, management, marketing, (post-)taylorist, sponsor, sponsorizare, taylorism*; some others, situated farther from full admittance into the representative vocabulary of the Romanian language: *public relations, consulting-engineering*, etc. Trying to conclude in a more generalized, theoretical manner, we should say that, if the category of the so-called “barbarisms” still exists – and most of these terms are currently coming from the specialized areas of knowledge approached via translation – then such terms, phraseological units and idioms (even those belonging to the mainly colloquial style) should be accepted by the usage of current Romanian: they should be adopted since they are used! (Incidentally, there are even some “technical metaphors” – which are used especially in *journalese* or in *translatese* – but the standard language should be more wary as to taking them over). The same goes for the related phenomenon of calque / *decalcomania* – if used, that use should be rather moderate, quantitatively and qualitatively.

It should be added that the felicitousness of one's specialized translation very much depends on sensing and grasping (as an “insider”) both the text to be translated, and the context. One has to know how to cope with, and also circumnavigate among, the specialized terms and phrases (including the cases of synonymy or quasi-synonymy), how to show flexibility as to the entirety of the context, how to prove credible and creditable (so that the text translated may sound natural, precise and rigorously adequate, and its author be recognized as an “insider”, or a “real professional”).

Some of the hardest issues to address when translating specialized texts belong to the pool of the lexicon; for

instance, *carburator* will be consistently translated as *carburetor* (although the vocabulary of engineering or of general science and technology is by no means simple or univocal), but legal texts are far more difficult to translate; for example, *persoane juridice* can be variously translated as *corporate bodies*, *legal entities*, *artificial persons*; *societate pe acțiuni (S.A.)* may translate as *company*, but a *societate cu răspundere limitată* is not merely (or always / univocally) a *limited liability company*; similarly, there are usage and contextual differences between, respectively, *partnership* and Rom. *parteneriat*, or Rom. *societate (comercială)* and *company, firm, concern*.

Specialized translations are, in a way, cases of “intra-lingual translation”, operating in-between different registers and manners of codification (in point of style, addressability, grammatical structure, etc.). If there are differences between the SL and the TL counterparts, it is also true that there are significant differences, inside the same language, between otherwise onomasiologically related terms, according to the specialized area each term is made use of, e.g. *motor* vs. *engine*, *load* vs. *charge*, *capacitor* vs. *condenser*, etc.

The pressure of the specialized term must also be reckoned with – as against the literalness of the text (especially when the dictionaries themselves are not very generous or clear in their explanations, or when the translator fails to take full advantage of their contents). Here are some examples: in a TV documentary, *breeze* was translated as Rom. *briză*, a term which completely lacks the specialized description (cf. Eng. *breeze* “*Meteorol.* any wind ranging in speed from 4 to 31 miles per hour: see *Beaufort scale*” (Webster); “*Meteorol.* a wind of force two to six inclusive on the Beaufort scale” (COLL). The term *rapids* “part of a river where the current is very fast and turbulent” (COLL) was rendered as “repezișuri”; similarly, *conning tower* (“Also called: *sail*; a superstructure of a submarine, used as the bridge when the vessel is on the surface” (COLL) was translated as “turn de observație”, although *turelă* would have been much more appropriate. The zoological term *bull-frog* (“any of various large frogs, such as *Rana catesbeiana* (American bullfrog), having a loud deep croak” – (COLL) was literally translated as *broască-bou* (!), although the Romanian counterpart – *buhai (de baltă)* – should be a rather familiar term, even for non-specialist translators. Various other improprieties related to the literalness of the ST lead to such infelicitous / debatable, rather jarring renditions as: *court music* (instead of *courtly music*), *profane music*, etc. Similarly, some translators seem to be too lazy or lacking linguistic inspiration to come up with decent renditions, e.g. *sunt în curs de coliziune* (cf. Eng. *they are on a collision course*); *cockpitul (mașinii)*.

But the most deplorable cases of mistranslation are represented, in our opinion, by those renditions featuring blatant lack of (specialized) overall culture, or else the trivia of the profession, e.g. *cross-examination* translated as “interogatoriu încrucișat” (cf. Eng. *to cross-examine* “*Law.* to examine (a witness for the opposing side), as in attempting to discredit his testimony” (COLL); *justice of the peace* translated as “judecător al păcii”; *Newfoundland* translated as such, when the geographical name used in

Romanian tradition has long been *Terra Nova*; *Columbia River* mistranslated as “Districtul Columbia”, etc.

And still, good translators seem to be doing their job unflinchingly, and felicitous (counter-)examples are relatively abundant, illustrating what one could even call hyperscrupulousness (in specialized contexts), e.g. *bump* rendered through *protuberanță*, *warm-blooded* rendered through *homeoterm* (cf. *poichiloterm*, Eng. *poikilothermic*), *under the arm* rendered through *în zona subaxială*, etc.

In the present connection, it should be stated that *contextualization* (of a complex type) seems to be the absolute rule in this domain, and it operates on several levels: (1) the semantic-referential level (*what* is it we are referring to? *which* mechanism / device / process is the topic of the text? etc.); (2) collocation and style (is the phraseological unit or phrase/syntagm well inserted? is the type of expression recognized by the respective functional style / register, or by the standard normative glossaries, dictionaries, guidebooks and textbooks of the respective language?); (3) discourse-related (i.e. concerning the recipient: is the translated message appropriate to the reading public / audience in point of nomenclature – or is it felt as rather technical / contrived? – e.g. translating *arheoscheletologie* (cf. *arch(a)ozoology*) to render *studying old bones*). Then, there are some more “mundane” cases of mistranslation, also related to the phenomenon of *linguistic interference*, originating in the translators’ shaky knowledge of grammar, semantic and WF structures, e.g. “În cadrul acestui capitol au fost identificate formele care...” translated as “...there were identified the...”; “instrumentele de suflat populare” translated as “the popular blowing instruments”. Virtually all the technical and scientific papers translated by our engineering specialists “smack” of the Roumanized version of *translatese*, e.g. rendering various passive structures in a faulty manner: *There are to be found...*, *It is sometimes made use of these...*; failure to observe the English, fronted, place of the subject; invariable early placement of the adjective, even when it is derived from a past participle form, e.g. “the *observed* phenomena”; overuse of a number of typically Romanian (neologistic) verbs “of general meaning” / “of broad collocation”, such as *a realiza*, *a executa*; obsessively using the *gerunziu* forms instead of simpler, coordinate structures, or using the demonstrative *acesta, aceasta*, even when there is proximal coreferential sequencing, a case where Rom. *el / ea*, or else the Ø 3rd person personal pronoun could have been used.

That (multidisciplinary) *translatese* operates in both directions can be proved by such Romanian structures (culled from some of my technical colleagues’ scientific writing) as: “realizarea sistemelor actuale complexe de *conducere a proceselor* de alimentare-ardere la...” (cf. Eng. *to conduct a process / an experiment*, etc.), “...au demonstrat pentru câteva plante (...) că trihomii nu sunt distribuiți *randomic*, între ei existând o distanță minimă...” (cf. *random, randomly*).

Finally, let us have an illustrative glimpse at some of the absolute translation howlers and Anglicized terms, which have come to be integrated into a kind of happy-go-lucky linguistic globalization (sadly, the following hilarious, even grotesque, expressions are absolutely genuine):

(1) Sheer barbarisms: “background-ul pe care universitatea organizatoare îl are în *tutoring* și *monitoring*”, “Aceste activități sunt undeva în spate, în *background*”, “ghidantă [*< Eng. guidance*] și consiliere... adică îndrumare...”, “organizația *receptoare*” [= “care va primi studenții pentru specializare” – cf. Eng. *recipient*], “ce anume *se fitează* cel mai bine cu obiectivele specifice”, “printr-un proces de *matching* și cuplare de interes...”, “nevoi ale educatorilor *apte* să se *fiteze* cu nivelul adulților”, “În aceste trei *boxuri* (= rubrici, căsuțe, casete) ni se cer: limba oficială a proiectului etc.”, “să facă dovada *team-spirit-ului*”, “să nu ne prindă *dead-line-ul* fără proiectul trimis”, “*clamez* bani pentru sistemul de îmbunătățire a *abilităților* din domeniul...”.

(2) Internationalized terms, or terms bound to become internationally recognized terms: “formulare de *aplicație*”, “*aplicanții*” [instead of Rom. “solicitanții, petiționarii”], “informații despre *aplicant*”, “am *aplicat* doar noi [pentru acest program]”, “plan *educațional*” [instead of Rom. “plan de învățământ”], “exemplul acesta cu *mobilitățile* este cu totul altceva”, “estimarea *abilităților* achiziționate”, “materialele de *referință*” [instead of “bibliografie, material(e) documentar(e)”], “instituții de *educație vocațională*” [instead of “de învățământ (de tip) tehnic și profesional”], “adulții să *acceseze* [instead of “să aibă acces la...”] structurile educaționale *non-formale*”, “negociere care se face în mod *non-formal*”, “un *set* de parteneri ne-au contactat”, “ceri tu, ca și coordonator, o *extensie* a programului”, “căutam acțiuni și *locații* mai ieftine”, “să dispună de *facilități ICT* de comunicare”, “*cetățeni seniori* – adică persoane pensionate ...”, “puteți folosi afișaje, *postere, afișe*”, “Un *mail* pe care să ni-l *forwardați* și nouă”, “să ne însușim *achisul* comunitar”, “Comisia Europeană nu mai acceptă termenul de «persoană handicapată», ci «persoană cu *dizabilități* fizice» sau «persoană cu *nevoi speciale*»”.

(3) Various types of calque – as an intermediate category: “Să le și normăm [= aceste activități] în *termeni de bani*”, “*costuri* [instead of “cheltuieli”] pentru persoana *acompaniatoare*”, “a *se discretiza*” [referring to *objectives* – in the sense of Rom. “a fi defalcate / departajate / distinse” – cf. *discret* / Eng. *discrete* “1. separate or distinct in form or concept; 2. consisting of distinct or separate parts”], “Ni se permite să *adiționăm* noi parteneri din țara *accidentă*”, “țară *accidentă*”, “sesiune de evaluare” (cf. *assessment session*), “vectorul de la care pleacă în *țările-țintă*” [cf. Engl. *target countries*], “ce *expertiză* au partenerii noștri?”, “acțiunea... X... se face în trei *pași*” [instead of *etape*], “*vântul schimbării*”, “atâția euro pe *linie* pentru plata traducerii” (cf. Eng. *line* “rând”), “Despre *cum* *ideea capătă* formă”, etc.

To conclude, we have to express our hope – as both linguists and (professional interdisciplinary) translators – that the essential channel of neologistic influence represented by translation will continue to do its job of “synchronizing” our language with the western European languages (including English, today’s “global language”), as many seminal carriers of cultural information in the modern world – without however overdoing it, to the extent of the ludicrous and the disruptively ambiguous.

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