MULTICULTURAL DIALOGUE: TRANSLATING CULTUREMES

Adina Oana Nicolae

Assist. Prof., PhD, "Petroleum-Gas" University of Ploiești

Abstract: The paper invites the reader to a finer apprehension of the bridges between two cultural systems through an approach to the challenges that necessarily accompany the process of translation. An analysis of the English version of a Romanian source text (Ion Creangă's 'Memories of My Boyhood') is pursued with a view to the treatment of culturemes, which are understood as portions of cultural behaviour which are specific to cultural patterns. Since culturemes are often rooted in language acts, the paper argues that translator's intercultural task requires the control of socio-culturally conditioned rules of behaviour which regulate language use and may vary with the choice of language.

Keywords: cultureme, intercultural, multicultural, translation strategies.

Cultural studies applied in translation have gained momentum in the works of Margot (1979), Pergnier (1980), Oksaar (1988), Vermeer and Witte (1990), Cordonnier (1995). Linguistics and linguistics-oriented approaches to translation have also gone beyond the traditional level parameters and have increasingly focused attention on discourse and text constraints and variations as well as on intercultural transfer. It is in such a context that the problematics of cultural units in translation has begun to be dealt with in culture studies that integrate the socio-cultural dimension of translation, such as the theory of culturemes.

The term 'cultureme' has been created starting from the well-known template of the traditional linguistic units phoneme/ morpheme/ lexeme/ semanteme and represents a concept that bridges language and socio-cultural context. The idea must have been inherited from cybernetics and refers to a measuring principle applying to amounts of originality or information, being inextricably linked, not only through its name, to a specific culture.

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

Translation scholars have distinguished clearly between translation units and cultural information terms and have touched upon the core issue of the concept by using syntagms such as 'prestigious allusions' (Vinay and Darbelenet 1977), 'cultural terms' (Newmark 1977), 'cultural allusion', 'cultural reference', 'ethnonyms', 'folkloremes',. Moles (1967), Oksaar (1988), Vermeer (1997), Lungu-Badea (2004, 2005, 2009) are among the researchers who tried to outline and elaborate on the concept of cultureme from various theoretical standpoints. A common denominator in these different representations of the cultureme is the definition of the term as a cultural information-bearing unit. Moles (1967) refers to it as to a cultural atom, so that mass culture, in Moles' view, is made up of a patchwork of culturemes, manipulated by man – a social atom – and circulated in the media.

The cultureme has also been analysed in connection with the cultural traits of the verbal layer (words, linguistic formulae, paralinguistic elements), the extra-verbal layer (time, space, proxemics) and the non-verbal layer (gesture, body language).

Oksaar's study (1988) is situated within the domain of cultural transfer. A sociological approach to the term can be found in the works of two Romanina sociologists, Benko (1985, 1989) and Evseev (1985). According to Evseev (1985), a cultureme (Rom. culturem/ culturemă) encompasses the result provoked by a cultural act starting from its impact on the receiver of the message, in a stage called post-information. A cultureme is also supposed to have a pre-operational stage, pre-information, and may ultimately be included in the receiver's memory or cultural knowledge.

A series of oppositions have been highlighted in Lungu-Badea's translation studies (2004). In an attempt to define the cultureme by means of binary oppositions, she contrasts the cultureme and other related notions such as the connotation, the allusion, the neologism, the translation unit, the cultism.

The cultureme is to be distinguished from the connotation. Connotation is activated in a particular context and guides the understanding of the word or phrase, being the network of associations or secondary meanings the word or phrase carries. The implied value judgement incumbent in connotation is often culturally and emotionally determined, which is why it may be conceptually contiguous to culturemes. However, a cultureme is not connected to a constellation of meaning associations and targets the primary meaning itself.

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

The cultureme and the allusion suppose a different rapport between themselves and the speaker. Allusions are mainly based on literature, mythology and historical figures and events, whereas culturemes spring from a vaster variety of sources. Allusions only covertly link concepts the reader is already familiar with, while understanding culturemes supposes acquiring new knowledge of and insights into the target culture.

Neologisms fill in a lexical gap in the language so that, at some point, all international words would be neologisms; they form a broad category, including both borrowings and internally newly formed words in a language. Culturemes, though, are not derived due to a lexical rule, nor do they generally yield borrowings.

A translation unit is too broad a term, it will not always, if at all, coincide with a cultureme; there may be mismatches in their length and these mismatches may be enhanced by a further lack of correlation between a certain cultureme and its translation into another language.

Drawing on Lungu-Badea's (2009, 32-72) comprehensive analysis of the nature of culturemes, one can summarize the key features of this concept. It is worth noting that a cultureme is of variable size, not necessarily representing only one linguistic unit; it is a non-decomposable unit with simple or complex lexical structure; it is lexicalized in the source language and it has cultural content; it is mono-cultural and autonomous in translation.

The features that are useful both in identifying culturemes and in translating them are related to form and function. On the one hand, formally, culturemes are both simple, e.g. zmeu (a kind of dragon representing the forces of evil, a typical fantastic character in Romanian mythology) and complex, e.g. burtă-verde (a Philistine, a narrow-minded person, only concerned with materialistic values). On the other hand, functionally, historical culturemes are either diachronically sound, e.g. the archaism limbă (people), the regional term ocolniţă (a map of a property), or contemporary ones, which may be approached from a synchronic approach to language at a specific point in time, e.g. Făt-Frumos (Prince Charming).

In the following lines, the source language to be investigated is Romanian and the source text is Amintiri din copilărie (Memories of My Boyhood) by Ion Creangă. A Moldavian-born classic Romanian writer, also a school teacher, Ion Creangă (1837-1889) is considered to be a main figure of the nineteenth century Romanian prose, and Memories of My Boyhood is his best-known volume, although his work also includes

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

novellas and short-stories. The first three parts of the target text were published anthumously (1880-1882), while the fourth appeared posthumously. The subject matter of the book lies in the destiny of a peasant child on his way to maturity, it portrays the universal path from innocence to experience. The backdrop of this initiation is a typical nineteenth century Moldavian village, with all its traditional customs, fairs and festivals, red-letter days' rituals, everyday country and family life, school-teaching rules and happenings, and its marvellous natural setting. The translation chosen as target text was a collaborative project carried out by Ana Cartianu and R.C. Johnston (1995).

From the point of view of formal complexity, the culturemes in the source text range from simple (e.g. mocan, Romanian inhabitant of mountainous regions, typically a shepherd; Vodă, title of the Romanian rulers, sovereign; clacă, voluntary get-together of several peasants to help one another, often accompanied by story-telling or singing, or followed by a party; Moşi, literally old men, a name of several religious commemorations of the dead; bădița, a diminutive term of endearmeant referring to an older peasant or to a lover; chilie, a small, simple room inside a monastery; hrincă, a large slice of bread or polenta; dor, yearning, homesickness or lovesickness) to complex (e.g. pierde-vară, an extremely lazy person; a-şi face pomană, to do somebody a favour, to help somenone; om de omenie, a good, honest, hospitable, considerate person; Baba Dochia, a Romanian mythological creature; sat răzăşesc, a village of free peasants, owners of small pieces of land, etc.).

On the diachronic axis one could assign a series of historical culturemes (e.g. vornic, vătăman, vlădica, Mezii-Păresii, sorcovăț, husaş, Cârneleaga, whose translations are mentioned below) and on the diachronic axis belong contemporary culturemes such as hramul bisericii, the celebration of a patron saint's day in an Orthodox church; se ține ca râia de om, to cling on to somebody like grim death; a fugi ca dracul de tămâie, to give somebody a wide berth, etc.

Content analysis reveals that the culturemes that need to be addressed in translation belong to a variety of fields of human experience: objects and artefacts, school and learning life, spoken language, folklore and fantasy, jobs, geography, history, religion, economy, food, celebrations and customs, religion and economic life.
To begin with, the domain of food offers a number of dishes and utensils specific of Moldavian traditional cuisine, e.g. mămăligă (polenta, a traditional Romanian dish made of corn flour and water, found especially in peasants' meals), cozonac (sweet

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

bread typically baked for Christmas), colaci (honey buns or plain buns that are offered as alms gifts for the soul of the dead to rest in peace), făcăleţ (a wooden stick used in stirring the polenta), or specific food preparation, e.g. smântânirea oalelor (skimming the milk).

In the dynamics of family and village life, economy-related matters (icusar and irmilic, old Turkish coins made of silver or gold; sorcovăț, old silver coin of Russian origin; husaș, old silver coin of Hungarian origin) and religion (e.g. vlădica, bishop; Sâmbăta lui Lazăr, Lazarus' Saturday, celebrated on the Saturday before Palm Sunday) feature prominently. Celebrations and customs such as Patruzeci de Sfinţi (Forty Martyred Saints) or Cârneleaga (the week between Christmas and Epiphany) are frequently connected to the Orthodox religious calendar.

Concepts that are peculiar of a certain epoch and place (e.g. târg, the market place in or outside a village or town where on special days cattle, cereals, food are sold; vatra satului, the territory of the village where the houses lie) are subject to cultural interferences.

Jobs and occupations such as gospodar (an industrious and skilful farmer), dascăl (a parish clerk, a cantor as well), vornic (the mayor of a village); vătăman (deputy mayor in a village), lingurari (gypsies whose craft is that of making spoons) are yet another source of culturemes.

Folklore and fantasy elements emerge as culturemes which impregnate the memories' discourse, such as strigoi (masculine)/ strigoaice (feminine), i.e. men's or women's souls which turn into an animal or a phantom at night in order to bother other people.

The flavor of spoken language is rendered in a number of expressions that lend the flow of discourse it peculiar Moldavian character, as in dragă/ drăgăliță Doamne (dear God/ Heaven help us!).

School and learning-related reminiscences are of primary importance in recalling the boyhood years, increasing the amount of cultural specificity infused in the account through ceaslov (a bulky prayer book); psaltire (psalter); dar de şcoală nouă (schoolwarming gift).

The rural life is individualized through culturemes related to household objects, for example specific traditional clothing articles such as catrinţă, a Romanian apron-like skirt which is embroidered manually, sarică (a heavy woolen cloak), etc.

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

Translation strategies (adapted from Vinay and Darbelnet (1977) and Newmark (1988)) identifiable through the target-source matchings of culturemes include:

- Literal translation, a straightforward strategy that preserves the core meaning and is efficient in the immediate rendition of the message: e.g. psaltire = psalter, vlădica = bishop.
- Functional equivalence (adaptation) works to the benefit of the denotation, omitting the cultural specificity of the source language items: e.g. tindă = lobby, glasurile = the church chants; bucheludeazla şi bucherițazdra = ABC, Mezii-Păresii = mid-Lent; umblarea cu plugul = carol-singing; colivă = cornmeal cake.
- Near-synonymy is arrived at in the translation dascăl = dominie/ one of the church elders.
- Under-specification is a strategy whose space saving advantages are preferred to the loss of meaning traits: e.g. catrinţă = skirt; târg = town; gospodar = farmer; bădița = Master; lingurari = gypsies; Calul Bălan = Dapple-Grey; clacă = party.
- Distortion of meaning occurs in chilie = fine room (its poverty is not implied at all); hârjoană = fighting (the jocular, non-violent character of the fight is left unattended to).
- Explanation, a rather rare occurrence, stems from the translators' effort to be as clearly understood as possible, despite the inconvenience of a lengthy insertion into the target text, e.g. moş Fotea, cojocarul satului = old Fotea, who used to make sheepskin coats for the village; vatra satului = the village itself.
- Change of category is illustrated below in the adaptation of historically marked terms to their modern-day counterparts: e.g. vornic = mayor, vătăman = deputy-mayor; Vodă = Prince; vlădica = bishop. The archaic style of the account is thus lost.
- Glossaries are provided at the end if the target text, e.g. prăjină = old-fashioned Moldavian square measure about six yards by two, i.e. an oblong strip of twelve square yards; potcap = clerical headgear of the Orthodox priests.
- Over-specification occurs in zaveră = the 1821 uprising.
- Untranslatability is found to be the case for a series of deeply entrenched culturemes, e.g. horă, doină, mămăligă, şezătoare, etc. Sometimes they are taken over as such and are combined with English morphemes, e.g. hore = horas.

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

- Omission of what is judged to be peripheral meaning can be noticed, for instance, in fete mândre care ştiau a învârti şi hora, dar şi suveica = comely girls who could swing the shuttle too, (where no information about the girls being good dancers is provided in the target text).

What results from this incursion into the way the translation of culturemes creates intercultural and multicultural bridges is that they still represent challenge in translation and in translation studies. They are worth identifying as functional concepts and their lexical role or symbolic value needs to be acknowledged and tackled efficiently. All in all, the concept of cultureme needs to be more firmly asserted in theory and practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Benko, O. 'Culturema sau despre iradiaţiile mesajului receptat'. In Cultură, model, educaţie permanentă. Aspecte actuale ale educaţiei permanente. Timişoara: Tipografia Universităţii din Timişoara, 5-14. 1985.

Benko, O. 'Culturema. Punct final?'. In Elemente de teoria şi practica informaţiei şi comunicării. Timişoara: Tipografia Universităţii din Timişoara, 184-196. 1989.

Cordonnier, J.-L. Traduction et culture. Crédif: Hatier/Didier. 1995.

Creangă, I. Amintiri din copilărie/ Memories of my boyhood. Translated by A. Cartianu and R.C. Johnston. Sibiu: Editura Universităţii Lucian Blaga. 1995.

Evseev, I. 'Proiectul unei grile valorice a textului lecturat'. In O. Benkö et al. (eds) Cultură, model, educaţie permanentă. Aspecte actuale ale educaţiei permanente. Timişoara: Tipografia Universităţii din Timişoara, 15-32. 1985.

Lungu-Badea, G. Teoria culturemelor, teoria traducerii. Timişoara: Editura Universităţii din Timişoara. 2004.

Lungu-Badea, G. Tendinţe în cercetarea traductologică. Timişoara: Editura Universităţii din Timişoara. 2005.

Lungu-Badea, G. 'Remarques sur le concepte de culturème'. In Translationes, 1: 15-77. 2009.

Margot, J.C. Traduire sans Trahir. Lausanne: L'âge de l'homme. 1979.

Moles, A.A. Sociodynamique de la culture. Paris-La Haye: Mouton et Cie, 1967.

Newmark, P. 'The translation of proper names and institutional and cultural terms'. In Incorporated Linguist, 16(3): 59-63. 1977.

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)

Nemark, P. A Textbook of Translation. New York: Prentice-Hall International. 1988.

Oksaar, E. Culturemtheorie. Ein beitrag zur Schprachverwendungsforchung. Gőtingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 1988.

Pergnier, M. Les fondements sociolinguistique de la traduction. Paris: Honoré Champion. 1980.

Vermeer, H. J. 'Translation and the Memes'. In Target 9(1): 155-66. 1997.

Vermeer, H. J., Witte, H. Exkurs 3: Kultureme. Text context Beiheft 3, Mőgen Sie Zistrosen. Heidelberg: Julius Groos, 135-145. 1990.

Vinay, J-P., Darbelnet, J. Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais. Paris: Didier. 1977.

BDD-V2026 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:08 UTC)