Idiomatic Elements and Their Specific Issues in the Process of Translating Fiction

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Resumen: En las últimas décadas la ciencia de la traductología se ha visto afectada por un nuevo enfoque y una nueva visión del proceso traductológico y de sus propósitos. La traducción deja de ser una transposición de un texto y se convierte cada vez más en una forma de equiparar conceptos y nociones entre culturas independientes. El traductor necesita ser un buen conocedor de la realidad, de la historia y de las particularidades socio-culturales de otro espacio, ya que todos esos rasgos se reflejan en la lengua fuente y es preciso reflejarlas, de alguna manera, en el texto meta. Hemos identificado una variedad de elementos idiomáticos estrechamente relacionados a las particularidades de cualquier comunidad etnolingüística, que clasificaremos y analizaremos en nuestra ponencia.
Palabras clave: traductología, culturema, argot, colocación, eufemismo.

0. **Translating culture**. Translatology as a science is the direct result of the changes the Western World underwent in the second half of the last century, after a destructive war and a turn in the direction of international cooperation; the end of the century brought the world a step closer to globalization, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the beginning of the digital era.

Virtual communication provided the background for the direct contact of users around the world, so the necessity for translation instruments has increased exponentially.

The bases for a scientific translation were properly laid during the decade of the '50s. Translations have been around for centuries: the Romans founded their culture on the translations from Greek philosophy, history and theater; in medieval Toledo there were Christian, Muslim and Jewish philologists working together on the translation and interpretation of the most valuable ancient and later writings; the Jewish and Aramaic sacred texts were translated into Greek, Latin, Old Slavic, and then into the modern European languages and produced the Bible as we know it today. But while the translation of scientific or religious texts may raise specific issues of terminology or interpretation according to the dogma, the real challenge appeared in the late 20th century with the publishing boom of fiction written in dialects or in slangs and the necessity to translate it without losing the specificity of the cultural background of the original. Certainly, literature written in or including dialects or slang appeared much earlier, as early as the 19th century in some parts of Europe (more than 2200 years ago in Ancient Rome!), as a result of the

national awakenings throughout the continent, and some of such works were translated into other languages. French authors such as Eugène Sue or Ponson du Terrail were famous for the use of Parisian slang in their works, and in certain British authors of the Victorian era the representation of slangs and dialects is quite systematic, as we can see in the novels signed by Charles Dickens, George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell. Nevertheless, the late 20th century represents the beginning of the direct and massive contact between cultures, so the translation process needs to find a new and improved balance between literal transposition, acculturation and adaptation of the texts.

Contemporary translators agree that translation is not meant to be a re-writing of the story for a new audience or an adaptation for a new cultural background. While for an 18th century translator the story was the main purpose of the process (and some translators adapted the story according to the cultural background of the target audience, including the translation or overall replacement of the names of the characters), modern translations focus more on the way the story is told, so they tend to preserve the specific cultural and linguistic features of the text, so that the final result does not contradict the reality of a different geographical area, that of the source language.

Such an approach raises a number of issues that have to do with the architecture [Flydal, 1951] of both the source and target languages. Linguistic variation is not – and cannot – be similar in any two languages, so the translator needs to make some difficult choices in the process of translation in order to reflect the contrast between the standard language and its variations. Moreover, there are specific cultural elements in the source language that are not represented in the target language, spoken by a community that has no contact whatsoever with such cultural elements.

I have tried to identify and classify the most problematic idiomatic elements that challenge the translator to think outside the box and find the best solution for the target audience. Eugenio Coseriu identified four dimensions of linguistic variation: diachronic, diatopic, diastratic and diaphasic, corresponding to: the historical stages of a language, its geographic variants, its sociolects and its styles or registers [Coseriu, 1981], and each of those four dimensions has its own idiomatic issues that can be challenging in the process of translation.

1. **The diachronic aspect**. Languages undergo a continuous transformation, so that at any moment in time older words coexist with newer ones, and this confers depth to the literary discourse. Many fiction writers use the contrast between old and new linguistic elements as a tool to create a temporal environment that evokes past eras and sets the events in a proper cultural climate. The problem here is how far a translator should go in the process of translation, since different languages evolve in different ways over time. Let us think, for example, of the modernization of languages: there are historical events that trigger periods of rapid transformation in one language, while other languages stagnate, as they are not affected by the same event. A medieval writing such as *The Poem of the Cid* is easily understood by a modern Spanish speaker, albeit its differences in syntax or spelling, since Spanish has had a constant modernization. *Beowulf*, on the other hand, is not accessible to modern English speakers, as the Norman conquest changed the English language at all its levels during a period of around four or five centuries of rapid transformation. The language in the works of Cervantes and Shakespeare is very similar to the present day language, with just a touch of archaism that does not impede understanding. If we are to compare this with the situation in Romanian, for example, things cannot be more different: the Romanian texts of the 17th century show a language

that is not very accessible to present day speakers, for Romanian started its modernization much later, in the 19th century. The Romanian language that was contemporary to Shakespeare and Cervantes shows many differences in syntax and morphology, but especially in vocabulary: there were many *archaisms* in use, most of them of a Slavic, Greek or Turkish origin. So the dilemma of Shakespeare's translator into Romanian is: should I translate into a 17th century Romanian or into a version of Romanian that is slightly obsolete, just to convey my text a little authenticity? If we look at the vocabulary Shakespeare uses, there are many terms that in Romanian are still perceived as *neologisms*. For example, in his *Sonnet 116*: *admit, impediment, alter/ alteration, fixed*, etc., have perfect Romanian equivalents, but the Romanian words are less than a century old (or less), so should they be used in the translation? Apparently, ancient history is more recent in Romanian than in English, and is more recent in English than in Spanish.

The poor balance between archaisms and neologisms may destroy a translation, especially when we deal with a second translation. There is a trend to re-translate classical literature by adapting the vocabulary to the present-day target language. I have recently read a contemporary translation of *Tom Sawyer* and compare it to the older version published in the '30s I used to read as a child; I can understand the desire of the translator to adapt the language to the linguistic competence of the readers (mainly children), but the abuse of neologisms and modern slang caused a huge discrepancy between the original text and the translation, so I could not relate to the newer version.

2. **The diatopic aspect**. The geography of a language can be understood in three ways. First, we can speak about the territory of an ethno-linguistic community, where they share a unique standard language and they are united by the same culture and history. Second, we can focus on the territory of expansion of one language, so it becomes the common language of people with significantly different cultures and history (for example English in America, India or Australia). Third, we can consider the historical territory of a language and its regional particularities, such as dialects.

There are differences and similarities between the problems that appear in the translation of standard language and the translation of geographical varieties. Among the similarities, the most problematic issue in translation refers to culturemes. At the middle of the last century (1945), the first linguist to put cultural elements in the center of translation was Eugene Nida, who advocates for the translation of cultural concepts rather than words [Nida, 1975]. *Culturemes* can include a variety of notions, from material to immaterial patrimony. The most frequent culturemes that are difficult to translate refer to certain toponyms, historical events and public figures, ethnology, folklore, sports, architecture, religion, wildlife, flora, gastronomy, cinema, school textbooks, etc. For a British reader, for example, any reference to a trip to Gretna Green or to the chubby figure of Prinny is easily decoded, but a Romanian reader might need further information about getting married in Scotland or the life of King George IV, so translators usually add explanatory footnotes.

Culturemes regarding folkloric traditions or local heritage are often approached in a different manner. If we consider, for example, a Spanish novel describing the life of a bullfighter or of a flamenco dancer, the specific terminology is not translatable, for such cultural elements are specific to the Spanish culture and are not to be find anywhere else. The solutions in such cases can be to approximate the cultureme through a word with a close meaning, if possible, or, more frequently, to keep the foreign word as it is and perhaps add an explanatory footnote. This is how many foreign words end up entering a

different language without any other direct contact: through translations, we can borrow new notions along with their names.

I would now like to refer to another similarity, the translation of frequent combinations of words. The science of phraseology (paremiology included) identifies a variety of types of word combinations, from compound words to proverbs and famous quotes. But while idioms, phrases and proverbs are usually easy to manage, due to the specialized dictionaries, there is a category of word combinations that needs a more subtle approach: the *collocations*. There are various types of collocations and discourse formulae that do not pose a problem in the process of translation, as they are firmly fixed in the linguistic norm (as described by Coseriu), but there are cases of collocations that belong to the spoken language and are not to be found in dictionaries, for they are the result of the frequent selection and usage among speakers, but are not yet a part of the linguistic norm. For some of them, the norm accepts several versions: the Spanish structure "traducir al francés", for example, can be translated into English as "translate into French" or "translate to French"; both variants are acceptable, according to the norm, but the second one is less frequent than the first, so choosing the first variant would be more natural. Other are already fixed and do not accept different elements: English speakers, for example, "ask questions" and "make decisions", while French speakers "put questions" and "take decisions" and Spanish or Italian speakers "make questions"; using the equivalent of the English verb (**demander une question*, **faire une décision*) is not allowed in translation. The most sensible issue, though, is the one that refers to polysemantic words in collocations; we might find it surprising, for example, that the word *slice* can be translated in different ways in Spanish, according to the second term of the collocation: *a slice of bread – una rebanada de pan, a slice of lemon – una rodaja de limón, a slice of bacon – una loncha/ lonja de béicon, a slice of watermelon – una tajada de sandía*, etc. Such collocations are difficult to translate into a foreign language (in retroversion they are irrelevant), since they do not appear in bilingual dictionaries and almost never in thesauri.

Among the differences between translating standard and regional language, I have to mention the two possibilities: first, there is literature written entirely in a dialect; for the translators it is just like translating standard language, as long as they are fluent in that dialect, and the result will be written in standard target language. Second, there is literature written in standard language, with insertions of regional varieties. Dialectal pronunciation, syntax or vocabulary are commonly used as instruments that help with the construction of fictional characters; this is an ancient technique in literature: it was used, many centuries ago, by classical Latin writers Plautus and Petronius, so their plays are a valuable source for the knowledge of Vulgar Latin. The main issue in translating the dialogues written in dialects is: what dialect of the target language should the translator choose? Or should they invent a hybrid dialect that encompasses the phonetic features of the source dialect and the vocabulary of the target dialect? Translating cockney, for example, is usually a mixture of phonetic characteristics of this dialect (the treatment of the aspiration *h*), with some regional terms and a little slang. While a similar treatment of the aspiration is normal in some social groups in Southern Spain (Andalusia), it is most uncommon in Romanian, so Eliza Doolittle's pronunciation *'Enry 'Iggins* sounds exotic and unusual.

3. **The diastratic aspect**. Society is a structure formed by overlapping social groups, which tend to develop their own particular sociolects. Vertical stratifications of a language are becoming less obvious by the day; the popular access to the media (radio,

television, cinema and internet) has determined the birth of a trend of leveling, so the linguistic differences between social strata are constantly fading.

Nevertheless, authors use slangs in their literature to help build the atmosphere or to define a character. Slang is difficult to translate for a variety of reasons. First, because it is a closed sociolect and slangs develop independently from one another, so there may be huge differences between them even in a small area. Second, because it is based on creativity: humor, double talk, puns, expressivity, etc. Third, because there is a thin line between slang, colloquial speech and jargons, so a translator can easily be confused. Fourth, because the translator needs to have the linguistic competence (to know source and target slangs) and to determine whether the target slang holds similar concepts to the ones of the source slang. [Fawcett, 1997: 118]

But failing to absorb slang or regional elements in the translation leads to the loss of extremely important elements of characterization [Hamaida, 2007: 2], so the translator's task is to include the diastratic aspect in the target text after researching the status of the linguistic elements in both the source and target languages.

4. **The diaphasic aspect**. The fourth dimension of language regards the registers or styles of the language used in a certain discourse. In fictional literature, the styles and registers may vary between the narrative fragments and the dialogues, and a character may alternate registers according to the context of the dialogue. This may prove to be extremely challenging to the translators, for they need to have a high level of competence in both the source and target languages in order to understand and identify correctly the type of discourse before transposing it into the same register in the target text.

I have identified two main issues in the alternation of formal/ informal styles: expressing courtesy and using euphemisms. The first one can be really problematic while translating from English to a Romance language, for example, since English has only one pronoun for the second person, *you*, without distinguishing between registers. In European Spanish, for instance, a character in a novel can use the pronouns *tú* (informal), *vos* and *Usted*, according to the register, the communication context or the historical period (*vos* is nowadays obsolete, but it is a useful tool in the translation of historical novels, for example). In Romanian, the same character can choose between *tu* (informal), *dumneata* and *dumneavoastră* (or *Domnia Ta/ Domnia Voastră*, even more formal). A good translator would analyze each context in the English text and decide whether it is appropriate to use a formal or informal pronoun, based on the concrete dialogue and on the more general knowledge about social relationships of the epoch depicted in the novel.

The other idiomatic element that poses problems in translating language registers is euphemism. The difficulty of translating euphemisms and dysphemisms resides in their cultural background. Different cultures have different taboos or different degrees of interdiction of certain terms [Seiciuc, 2018: 187]. Translating taboos may be an extremely challenging task for the translator. Taboo words, when used systematically in one language, tend to lose their expressivity – and even their meaning – and become simple interjections or neutral words that do not shock the readers or the listener. Obscene words in Spanish or French are less offensive than their Romanian counterparts, so a Romanian translator would necessarily avoid them either in a published book or in the subtitles of a movie. The same happens with blasphemy: while the Spaniards seem to be immune to blasphemy, most Romanians are not. On the other hand, translating ethnical or racial references into English is a delicate question, so the translator needs to keep in mind that political correctness is mandatory in certain cultural environments.

5. **Conclusions**. Translating fiction from a language into another is a complex process of documentation in which the translator becomes familiar with the particularities (historical, social, ethnological, etc.) of a different cultural space and transposes the text so that it preserves them as much as possible, but nonetheless matches the particularities of the target cultural space. Such specific features are reflected in linguistic units, which we have grouped under the denomination of idiomatic elements. There are numerous idiomatic elements that pose difficult problems in the process of translation, and the most outstanding are archaic and regional terms, dialectal particularities, culturemes, collocations and other idioms, slangs, expressing courtesy and avoiding taboos. Each category of idiomatic elements raises a different set of difficulties in translation, which the translator needs to address in the quest for a valid cross-cultural item that conveys as much of the original information as possible. Translating fiction is a process that needs to find the balance between its main purpose (to provide entertainment) and the pursuit of fidelity with regard to the source text. The translated text will never be received and decoded by its readers in the same manner the original text is processed by its source readers. The mediated text (writer-translator-reader) can only offer a form of communication that is "both incomplete and inevitably slanted towards the domestic scene" [Venuti, 2000: 473].

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