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Socio-cultural Specificity and Translation. Socio-culturally Charged Idioms and Cultural Equivalence

Abstract*: The present paper aims at pointing some of the problems which appear when socio-cultural idioms are to be translated and also at analyzing the translation procedures and methods used in the Romanian- French analyzed examples.*

The term idiom is used here in the sense of verbal structure with a global and non-compositional meaning whose elements present a certain degree of cohesion.

We coin the syntagm "specific socio-cultural charge" to define in a generic manner the cultural information contained by a lexical unit. This socio-cultural charge may inform about a specific reality of the informant culture (civ.T) or about the language register/linguistic variety to which the analyzed structure (var.T) belongs.

Key words: *cultural equivalence, socio-cultural charge, translation, idioms, adaptation*

1. Socio-cultural charge and translation

The translation of a text containing specific socio-cultural information involves the use of a translation procedure named *adaptation:*

> « L'adaptation est le procédé de traduction indirect utilisé pour traduire une unité significative qui évoque d'une manière explicite des éléménts périlinguistiques propres à une communauté linguistique. » It must be conceived as « un ensemble de modalités de transfert du culturel qui concernent les termes marqués du point de vue civilisationnel et les interférences discursives causées par la non correspondence des connotations variétales dans les langues mises en rapport par la traduction. (T. Cristea,1982)

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The definition of this complex procedure involving many aspects must also take into consideration a number of factors which are closely related to each other:

a. the nature of the socio-cultural charge acting in the message

The socio-cultural charge may be of a civilizational nature, related to the linguistic varieties or it may combine the two. The specific information carried by the cultural allusions of various types (literary, social, historical, etc.) is also considered to be a civilizational one as it dispatches to « la connaissance répandue dans le public de certains faits historiques, certaines valeurs culturelles et sociales » (Vinay et Darbelnet, 1977)

b. the nature of the term or structure containing the socio-cultural charge

The socio-cultural charge may be contained by terms or structures of all kinds : cultural words, words belonging to a linguistic variety, addressing terms (relationnèmes), phrases and idioms containing a cultural word, phrases or idioms containing a linguistic variety term, phrases and idioms globally belonging to a linguistic variety, words, syntagms, phrases or idioms containing a cultural allusion.

c. the point of generalisation (see below The mechanism of the adaptation)

d. the functional levels of the adaptation

The translation act is, by its own nature, an integrant operation. Consequently, a severe delimitation between the different functional levels of the translation procedures (lexical, phrastical, discursive) is hardly operational.

The translation, viewed in its globality, implies complexe procedures determined by the consideration of the different parameters of the micro and the macro communication situation:

> «Le seul niveau pertinent étant effectivement celui du message qui intègre les niveaux inférieurs . » (T. Cristea, 2000, Stratégies, p. 104-105)

Nevertheless the analysis of the lower units involved in the mechanism of adaptation is important for the description of this mechanism hence for the description and delimitation of this translation procedure:

> « Dans la communication le sens se dégage de l'enchaînement des mots et des phrases, chacun et chacune ajoutant son apport aux autres mais bénéficiant aussi du leur. Le sens se construit au fur et à mesure que se déroule la chaîne parlée. » (M. Lederer, 1993, p. 19.) .

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2. The mechanism of the adaptation

The complex procedure of *adaptation* passes through several obligatory stages as it folows:

- In *the first stage* the specific socio-cultural charge contained in the source text (ST) is analysed from the point of view of its nature and its pertinence in the message. Actually, this operation is included in the general operation of acceding to the *meaning* of the texte: « În termenii semanticii lingvistice înțelegerea este interpretare; ea urmează un parcurs jalonat de etape distincte dar complementare: identificarea trăsăturilor semantice actualizate în text, a relațiilor care le structurează, a indicilor şi instrucțiunilor care permit stabilirea acestor relații. » (T. Cristea, ms, 2000)

- In *the second stage*, the indentified meaning passes through the general structuring zone situated between the two languages in contact (SL and TL), zone which allows the intercommunication. This translation (traversare) touches a *generalization point* choosen in function of the nature of the source unit carrying the specific socio-cultural charge, point which determines the functional level of the *adaptation* :

Source unit carrying the specific S-C charge *Generalization point*

Civ.T.....>General term
VarT…….....>Neutral (standard) term
Adressing term.....….....>General interactional frame
Phrase or idiom.....>General interactional frame

- The *third stage* consists of seeking into the diversification zone of the target language (TL) for a proper équivalent of the source unit, equivalent that must gather a bunch of caracteristics of the same nature as those of the source unit. If the seeking procedure fails to come to a result, the translator must resort to compensation procedures or he may remain in the neutral zone.

We must mention thet even if a quasi-identity of the specific SC charge of SL is offered by the TL, the respective charge belongs to its socio-cultural and linguistic system: « În lipsa acestora, (a expresiilor lingvistice cu caracter stabil, convențional, înscrise în limbă) ca urmare a unor referenți specifici, de cele mai multe ori marcați din punct de vedere socio-cultural, se recurge la operații de *desemnare*, momentane şi contingente, menite să suplinească *lacunele denominative*. » (T. Cristea, ms.2000). The translation « ne transpose pas un code en un autre mais appréhende et réexprime un sens.» (M. Lederer, 1993, p. 18)

The target equivalent of the source unit may exist in the common zone of conceptualization or at a certain distance from it, in a zone of low specificity, or in the zone of high specificity (diversification). Thus, we can speak of different degrees of adaptation, between a low degree (neutralization, explanatory periphasis) and a high degree (conversion, ethnocentrisme).

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3. The Translation of the Socio-Culturally Charged Idioms

Translating the Socio-Culturally Charged Idioms implies setting a relation between two *enunciative structures socio-culturally marked.* Therefore the translator must solve two problems: first, he must identify the relation between the global and non compositonal meaning of these idioms and the communication situation they refer to; then he transfers in TL the socio-cultural charge (information/meaning).

The socio-cultural terms (civ.T, var.T), terms carrying a specific cultural or lingvistic variety information, as all the simple terms, may be integrated in more complexe structures (unites de rang superieur): compound nouns, intensive clichés, phrases, idioms, **formules reflexes, énoncés bloqués (proverbes, dictons).**

All these structures may also be globally marked by the feature /+ language level/.

The work of the translator becomes, therefore, more difficult as, on the one hand, he must analyse the situational frame and build up an *equivalence* taking into account the situation of communication, and, on the other hand, he must launch the mechanism of the *adaptation* procedure.

Vinay and Darbelnet coined the term *equivalence* to define « *le procédé qui rend compte de la même situation que dans l'original, en ayant recours à une rédaction entièrement différente.* »(Vinay et Darbelnet, 1977). Their example is that of the «amateur qui plante un clou et se tape sur les doigts ». If he is French he says « Aïe ! », if he is English he says « Ouch ! ». The examples can continue with the Romanian who says « Au ! » in this situation, and so on.

Teodora Cristea noticed that the definition given by Vinay and Darbelnet « *repose sur deux critères de nature différente : le premier a trait à la dimension langagière (l'équivalence de situations énonciatives), le second est purement linguistique (refonte complète de l'énoncé source. » (2000, p.162)* These two criteria do not always go together: there are structures, in SL and TL, that may refer to the same situation without having a « refonte complète de l'énoncé source ». That's why it's better to *« parler d'une équivalence stricto sensu si les deux conditons mentionnées sont satisfaites, en conférant à l'équivalence le statut de procédé indirect et d'équivalence largo sensu si l'on considère que la simple correspondance d'instance énonciative est suffisante, indifféremment de la structuration hétéronymique ou indirecte de l'énoncé cible. » (id. p.163)*

Most of the equivalences are fixed and belong to a inventory of phrases, idioms, sayings, proverbs, **locutions (semi)automatisées, etc**. :

Ex : être connu comme le loup blanc / a i se duce buhul ca de popă tuns ; comme on fait son lit , on se couche / cum îţi aşterni, aşa dormi ; défense d'entrer / accesul interzis ; prenez garde à la peinture / proaspăt vopsit ; sărut mîna, doamnă! / mes hommages, Madame!; etc.

Having noticed that *« tout énoncé n'est que l'expression d'une certaine vision du locuteur, d'une représentation de la situation énonciative à laquelle il est confronté »*, Teodora Cristea (*op. cit.* p.163) states that *« c'est cette vision qui coordonne les mécanismes langagiers, en s'articulant linguistiquement, le plus souvent d'une manière idiosyncrasique »* (id.p.163)

The relationship established between idioms from the SL and the TL is based on the

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« équivalence situationnelle ce qui implique une interprétation globale de l'énoncé source. Les unités significatives apparaissent dans ce cas comme des entités non analysables. » (Teodora Cristea, 1982, p. 229)

The presence of the specific SC charge, in one of its forms we mentioned above, in idioms and other complex structures, allows us to distinguish, in terms of translation procedures, between a simple *equivalence* and an *adaptation* placed on the enunciative level that we call *cultural equivalence*.

Most of the idioms are culturally marked (charged): *« Zona cea mai idiomatizată este aceea a expresiilor figurate care include termeni privitori la civilizația rurală românească: a cloci pe vatră, a se muta de pe vatră pe cuptor, a sta pe cotlon (être très paresseux), a lega paraua cu zece noduri, a linge meleşteul, a tăia firul de la mălai în patru (être très avare). »* (T. Cristea, ms 2000, p. 6)

Sometimes the situations in which the idioms have been created are still known, the allusions they contain are still transparent but very often the idioms having lost their literal meaning, become figurative and difficult to explain.

Most frequently when we have to translate them we use the procedure called equivalence, just because the idioms are allusions to a situation in which they are used as reflexive expressions.

They are translated by going throug the generalization point represented by the situation that is common for the two languages. If the situation does not exist in the informed culture or if the idiom is carrying a specific SC information the adaptation is to be used.

The conceptual conflict or the referential anomaly included in the metaphorical structures expresses or is related to a certain conception of reality. This conception may be identical or very close in the two languages but very often it is totaly different and the use of the *modulation* is necessary in the translation:

> «Par la modulation d'une métaphore lexicalisée, la rupture isotopique de la langue source, marquée par la prédication inappropriée peut revêtir diverses formes et subir divers traitements en fonction de la classe morpho-lexicale impliquée et de la distance entre les champs référentiels évoqués ». (T. Cristea, 2000, p. 149)

Let us examine now the procedures and methods used by the translator in the situations mentioned above:

(1) - Ei măi băieți, amu **trageți la aghioase**, zise un plăieș scăpărînd și dînd foc unui brad. (I. Creangă, Amintiri)
- Et maintenant, mes enfants, **vous allez piquer une romance**, dit un des hommes en battant son briquet et en mettant le feu à un sapin.

a trage la aghioase (fam.) – dormir profondément /to drive one's pigs/hogs to market

Aghios (*înv*) is a romanian word of greek origin that means « saint ». Many religious orthodox songs begin in greek with this word.
The idiom is an ironical allusion to the way the priests, monks or psalm readers psalmodize their religious songs in church, giving the impression that they are rather snoring then singing.

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The Romanian verb *a trage* has here its familiar meaning of *doing something with pleasure, with passion.*

In the bilinguist text the Romanian familiar idiom containing a diachronical term is put in equivalence with a familiar French idiom also containing a diachronical term, *romance* (a narrative Spanish popular song). The translation recovers, thus, most of the meaning of the Romanian idiom and a part of its diachronical charge by a kind of conversion.

(2) - Pesemne te mănîncă spinarea, cum văd eu, măi țică, şi ia acuş te scarpin dacă vrei, ba ş-un topor îți fac, dacă mă crezi, de-i zice "aman puiule!" cînd îi scăpa din mîna mea. (I. Creangă, Amintiri)
- Je vois ce que c'est, l'échine te démange, gamin, je te vas gratter moi tout à l'heure, si tu veux, je te flanquerai même une peignée, tu peux m'en croire, que **tu crieras « grâce »,** mon fieu , en sortant de mes mains.

a zice aman – to ask for pity/ to beg for mercy

The Romanian idiom contains an old term of Turkish origin, *aman, interj*. (*înv.*), used when somebody is bagging for mercy (which, of course, means that he is in great difficulty). Here, this interjection diachronically marked is used as a noun. The French equivalent used by the translator is neutral but compensation techniques are applied at the text level and popular structures (*je te vas gratter, moi*,), familiar structures (*je te flanquerai une peignée*) and a diatopical (dialectal) terms (*fieu, dial.*) are combined in the TL in order to recover the style.

(3) Mă rog**, mi se dusese buhul** despre pozna ce făcusem, de n-aveai cap să scoți obrazul în lume de rușine. (I. Creangă, Amintiri)
Oui , **le bruit** de mon exploit **s'était répandu** si bien que je n'avais pas le coeur de montrer mon visage au monde, de honte.

The Romanian term *buh* (pop. et fam.) is no longer used in modern Romanian. It still exists in a few idioms such as: (*a-i merge, a i se duce buhul = to become notorious, to become a laughing-stock*), marked as regional structures in the dictionnaries. In some variants of these expressions the term *buh* is replaced by the term *vestea* (news, rumor). This is explained by Iorgu Iordan (I. Iordan, 1975, p. 270) by the fact that the word *veste* reminds the terme *poveste, basm* (*story, fairy-tale*).

The translation passes through the communication situation also retaining the ironical attitude of the author towards the rather bad position he was in.

(4) - Treceți la masă, ori vreți **să vă chem cu lăutari**? (M. Preda, Moromeții)
- Venez à table ou je dois **battre le tambour** pour vous appeler ?

a chema / a primi cu **lăutari – inviter avec tous les honneurs / faire un chaleureux accueil (kindly invite someone /give a warm welcome to someone)**

The expression contains a cultural word, civ.T, (*lăutari*) and it hints to the warm welcoming made to the special guests invited to the wedding feast in the countryside, or, to the moment when the people are invited to participate to the wedding, invitation accopanied

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by a pompous ceremony. In its colloquial meaning, the idiom is used ironically, when the welcoming is rather cold or indifferent. In (4) the translator retains and recovers in TL the contrast between, on one hand, the simple and natural act of coming to lunch that the family was supposed to accomplish and, on the other hand, the fact that they had been waiting too long before acting.

(5) a o pune de **mămăligă** (fam) – to be in the soup/in a fine mess

The idiom used to be followed by the phrase : *fără făină* (*without flour)* but this second part has been dropped in time. This forgotten part was permitting to accede to the literal meaning: *trying to prepare the traditional maize porridge without having the maize flour.* Cooking the maize porridge when we have the necessary ingrednents is easy; the whole thing becomes very difficult when we begin to preare the meal without the necessary ingredients at hand and thus we are in a deadlock. (I. Iordan, *op.cit.*, p. 290)

The sense of this idiom and the situation in which it may be used can change with the context:

(6) – Duceți-vă cu Dumnezeu! Și luați seama la Marinică să nu vă facă vreo ruşine, că dînsul **a cam pus-o de mămăligă**! (L. Rebreanu, Rascoala)
- Que Dieu vous protège ! Et faites attention à Marin, qu'il vous fasse pas honte, **c'est qu'il est plutôt barbouillé** !

In (6) the translator had well interpreted the contextual meaning of the idiom in SL (the character named Marin had drank too much and he is no longer able to face the situation) and he built a cultural equivalence using a familiar french structure and combining it with a familiar word sequencing specific to the oral code.

(7) Și de-l prindeau viu, la Stoicovici, ori nu la el, **nu intra Stoicovici la apă?**
Et si on l'avait pris vivant, chez Stoicovici ou ailleurs, **il était coincé Stoicovici, pas vrai** ? (D.R. Popescu, Duios Anastasia trecea)

- a intra la apă (fam.) – to get into hot water, to get into trouble
coincer (fam.) – **mettre en difficulté en questionnant????**

In (7) the translator recovers the diastratic charge of the Romanian idiom by combining the techniques: he is giving a incorporating structure (*coincer*) as equivalent to the Romanian idiom and then he uses a familiar French syntactic phrase (*pas vrai?*).

The Romanian word *brînză / cheese* is very frequently used in idioms. This can be explained by the fact that the cheese, the bread and especially the maize porridge used to be the basic food for the Romanian peasant.

In the South of Moldovia the children who were still in the street or visiting they neighbours at lunch time, were said: *« duceți-vă acasă, c-a făcut mă-ta brînză cu mămăligă » / Ok, go home now, your mother has cooked the maize porridge with cheese.* (I.

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Iordan, *op. cit.* p. 272) In idioms the word is very often expressing the little quantity or zero-quantity (**quantité nulle**) :

(8) – Păi bine, Anghelache, cum era **să facă** Miai **brînză mare**-m' ?
– Voyons, Anghelache, **de quoi tu voulais qu'il se vente**, le Miai ? (M. Preda, O adunare liniştită)

- a face brînză mare (fam.) / a nu face nici o brînză (fam.) – to get the cheese, to cut no ice
a nu fi (bun) de nici o brînză (fam.) – it is fit for dusthole, it is worth powder and shot

In (8), the French equivalent is neutral but the translator recovers the familiar language level by using two familiar French structures: the definite article associated with a proper noun (*le Miai*) and the un-reversed structure (*tu voulais*) in an interrogative sentence.

(9) Văzînd eu că **mi-am aprins paie-n cap** cu asta, am şterpelit-o de acasă numai cu beşica cea de porc, nu cumva să-mi ieie tata ciubotele şi să rămîn de ruşine înaintea tovarăşilor . (I. Creangă, Amintiri)
Voyant que **j'avais marché sur un guêpier** j'ai déguerpi rien qu'avec ma vessie de cochon, de crainte que papa ne m'enlève mes bottes, et que j'en sois pour ma courte honte devant les copains.

a-şi aprinde paie-n cap – to get into trouble

The Romanian idiom is an allusion to an old Turkish custom, borrowed by the Romanians, that is, to put on their head a straw mat and to set it in fire when they wanted to denounce an injustice. But usually the claimant was the one to be punished or the justice made by the judge cost the claimant higher than the initial injustice. This allusion contained by the idiom is functioning as a cultural charge but the translator chooses to neutralize it and to focus on rendering of the global meaning of the idiom.

In (10) the Romanian term *hram* (from the Slav hramŭ) designates the patron saint of a church and, by extension, the religious dedication day (annual fête) of a church:

(10) …el mi-a adus aminte **de hramul sfintei mucenice Paraschiva.**
… il m'a rappelé que **la fête de la sainte Paraskiva était proche. (** M.Sadoveanu, Zodia Cancerului)

In Romanian metaphorical idioms such as: C*e hram poartă / ţine? (pop.) – Who is this person?* The word *hram* has a deviant use as it refers to a person and not to a church:

(11) - Nici nu ştii cine-i mortul, **ce hram poartă.** (D.R. Popescu, Duios Anastasia trecea)
- Vous ne connaissez pas ce mort, vous ne savez pas **quel type c'était.**

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In (11) the translator retains the neutral meaning of the Romanian idiom and tries to recover in TL the language level by using an oral style phrase (**par un tour spécifique au code oral** (*quel type c'était).*

(12) Pe urmă nu s-a învoit să se amestece decît dacă merge şi primarul. Nu vrea **să intre în cine ştie ce bucluc**.(V.Voiculescu, Lipitoarea)
Finalement, il n'accepta de s'en mêler qu'à condition que le maire fût aussi présent. Ne voulant pas, disait-il **se fourrer dans le pétrin**.

In (12) the Romanian word (of Turkish origin) *bucluc (pop.et fam.)* means difficult situation, trouble. The French term *pétrin (fam)* recovers quite well this neutral meaning and also it has a diastratic charge. The two terms (Romanian and French) are included in a number of idioms such as: *a da de/a intra în bucluc (roum.)* ; *être / se fourrer dans le pétrin (fr.).*- to get into trouble, to get into a scrape/mess, to come a cropper (eng).

Conclusions

Generally the specific socio-cultural information carried by the civ.T, var.T, the cultural allusions, the global charge (+var), cannot pass through the filter of the common conceptual zone represented by **la *situation énonciative*.**

But we must come into details and point out that the transfer or better the reconstitution in TL of the specific socio-cultural charge of SL , may find different ways depending on the nature of this charge and of the unit carying it.

The cultural (civilizational) charge may be contained by th civ.T (ex.4. *a chema cu lăutari*, ex.5. *a o pune de mămăligă*) or by complex structures (idioms) including a cultural allusion (ex.9. *a-şi aprinde paie-n cap*) .

As the meaning of the idioms is global and non-literal (non-compositionnal), the meaning of each constituant, inclusively that of the civ.T, melts into the global one but it still leaves subtil traces in the source text. The translator must rebuild in the target text first the global meaning of the source idiom and then, by different compensation technics, the specific socio-cultural information.

As for the **linguistic variety charge** of th idioms two cases are reveled by our study:

a) the idiom may contain a var.T, and, in this situation this specific charge is transmitted to the whole idiom ;

b) the idiom is globally marked without containing any var.T.

The linguistic variety charge carried by idioms is neutralized in a first stage of the translation act and then, in the next stage it is recovered by a sort of conversion, either punctually or in other places in the text by using the compensation techniques.

In all these situations no direct transfer of the specific socio-cultural charge is involved. The translator establishes first an enunciative equivalence and after that he is seeking into the zone of specificity (diversification) of TL the most similar structure from the point of view of

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the specific charge. This charge is recovered either punctually or, most often, by compensation techniques.

This is what we like to call in terms of translation procedures **a socio-cultural equivalence.**

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