INTERCULTURAL TRANSFER OF SOCIAL IDENTITY VIA TRANSLATION: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

Mona Arhire, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Transilvania" University of Brașov

Abstract: The topic of this paper lies at the crossroads of several disciplines within the realm of linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis on the one hand, and translation studies on the other. One of the common points in the former group of disciplines is their concern with the social context on consideration that language and society are interrelated. The paper revolves around this natural partnership between language and society from a translational perspective. It aims at attaching social implications to the language of the interactants in the dialogue and looks into the way language and its social role are jointly dealt with in translation. The way the central characters of the contemporary American short-story Black Angels by J.B. Friedman exchange turns is set under the observant lens to account for the use they make of language so as to acquire social distinctiveness in front of the readership. In the source language, the heroes are labeled by their speech to such an extent that an attentive reader can tell one from the other in the absence of the auctorial intervention. This being given, some relevant examples from the translations from English into Romanian comprised in a learner corpus are scrutinized with a view to assessing the translator trainees' ability to transfer the two speakers' register markers to the target language and to linguistically preserve their individuality granted by the different social classes they pertain to. The conclusions pinpoint the extent to which the characters' social identity is preserved in the intercultural transfer by means of translation and the way the act of translation affects the perception of the said social identity by the target-language readers.

Keywords: social identity, translation, intercultural transfer, learner corpus, sociolect, neutralization.

1. Introduction: Language and social context

An interdisciplinary field itself, sociolinguistics is the obvious fusion between sociology and linguistics, for language is a social phenomenon by nature (Bell 1976). There is consensus among sociolinguists on the fact that sociolinguistics deals with the study of language in its social context and that language is socially dependent (Bell 1976, Hudson 1996, Trudgill 2000, Gardiner 2008, Spolsky 2010, Wardhaugh 2010, *etc*.). "The way people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the social relationships in a community, and the way speakers signal aspects of their social identity through their language" (Holmes 2008: 1). In line with Holmes' assertion, Spolsky (2010) points out that sociolinguistics investigates the social and individual language variation, further leading the way to sociolects. A sociolect is, as P. Trudgill defines it, "a variety or lect which is thought of as being related to its speakers' social background rather than geographical background" (Trudgill 2003: 122).

The language variation attributed to each individual by social status, the sociolect, separates social groups by social factors like age, gender, class, ethnicity, education, religion (Hudson 1996). The short-story lying at the basis of the analysis herein, *Black Angels* by B. J. Friedman (1983), displays a distinction between middle and upper classes. These are, in rough terms, the main social group divisions provided by sociolinguistics, namely of the speakers performing manual work as compared to those carrying out non-manual work (Trudgill 2000). Friedman is known to tackle social differences related to racism and issues

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)

of power in the reminiscence of the relationship between master and slave. The contemporary American writer has been engaged in the combat against racial discrimination, militating against slavery and the disregard of the black people – the core theme of the short-story. One of the weapons that the author uses in this fight is the social context perceived as "the social and personal relationships of the interactants with one another" (Coposescu 2002). This is also one of the declared concerns of Discourse Analysis, namely language use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers (Stubbs 1983:1).

Beside the auctorial descriptions, the way the heroes' actions, thoughts, but also language, are conducted plays a significant part in shaping their full image. As far as language is concerned, a character's speech is indicative of his adherence to a social class. The idea is highlighted by Bonaffini as follows: "Language variation not only pertains to the depiction of local colour, but plays a key role in distinguishing and individualizing the various characters of a work of literature" (1997: 280).

2. The social context in translation

In enterprises envisaging the intercultural and interlingustic transfer of works of literature, all these socially dependant language instances are firstly subject to recognition in the process of translating and, secondly, they require adequate translation strategies. The outcome of this process, namely the translation, should exhibit little or, preferably, no alteration of the social context as compared to the source language. The world created in literature is usually populated by fictional characters but follows the same social rules as the real world. Therefore, linguistic and cultural differences that inevitable occur at any encounter of languages in contact are among the most serious challenges that translators face. First, it is the translator's ability to identify the purpose for the author's linguistic choice, bearing in mind that it is but one of multiple varieties that languages have available. This means taking into account the social functions of the language. Second, the translator's attention needs to shift towards the strategies employed in ensuring a match between "writer meaning and reader meaning" (Hatim and Mason 1994: 92), with the writer and the reader producing and, respectively, receiving the same message in different languages while potentially possessing different cognitive backgrounds. In other words, the readers of a target-language version might not be equipped for the particular inference process that the creator envisaged in his readers.

In the short-story under scrutiny, the reflection of the heroes' difference in social status is clearly identifiable by their manners of speaking. There are striking structural, phonological and lexical differences, all of which are topics for translators. Given all this, neutralizing the social context would be a blunder on the translator's part since neutralization in translation implies the reduction of the social differences between the characters, the alteration of interpersonal relations, and a more reserved expression of opinions and emotions. Moreover, as Hatim and Mason point out, "[p]rinciples of equivalence demand that we attempt to relay the full impact of social dialect, including whatever discoursal force it may carry" (1994: 42).

3. The characters' social condition and sociolects

Viewed as displaying the social and personal relationship between the participants in a dialogue, the social context in Friedman's (1983) short-story *Black Angels* differentiates the two characters, Stefano and Cotten by their belonging to distinct social classes. This is

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)

mirrored by their speech, which decisively affects their act of communication as a whole. The short-story emerges by clarifying that Stefano is a freelance writer of manuals, whereas Cotten is an Afro-American employed by Stefano to mend his garden and house. This relationship of power is counterbalanced by the inversion, towards the final part of the story, of the roles the two heroes play in relation to each other: Stefano assigns Cotten intellectual tasks, using him as his personal analyst, confessing his personal life and hoping for advice. Under the new circumstances, the Negro, recognizing the importance of the new social role that Stefano endowed him with, charges him enormous fees, which heavily contrast with the ones he had required for manual work.

The characters' difference determined by their positions in the respective social layers is mirrored in their particular sociolects, Stefano using a much more careful language than Cotten. Yet, in the author's intentions to attach ideological features to the discourse, Cotten's bad language is compensated by his industrious work, punctuality and a psychologist's mind. So, the writer might have pursued the idea of changing the reader's presupposed preconception about the Negroes' social status, gradually presenting Cotten as a more and more positive character at the expense of shedding a rather inconvenient light on Stefano. Towards the end of the story, Cotten asks Stefano: "You any good?" (Friedman 1983: 308).

The short-story *Black Angels* by Bruce Jay Friedman (1983) was translated by nineteen of the MA- level students at the Faculty of Letters, Transilvania University of Braşov, so the learner corpus that has been compiled so far allowed for the extraction of material conclusions as to the translation methodology, the challenges different translators face, their choices of translation versions, as well as the outcome.

The analysis focuses on the two characters interacting in the short-story: Stefano, the main character, and Cotten. As previously pointed out, the difference in the two characters' sociolects is the one that situates them on different social layers in front of the readers. Thus, the sociolect and the unequal social status that reveal the social gap between the characters are obvious. These aspects are subject to observation in the students' translations.

Stefano generally uses a careful spoken language. But, at times, in order to fit Cotten's level of education or integrate into Cotten's social class and thus better catch his attention and also, overwhelmed by the emotional content of his discourse, he would switch towards a language register closer to Cotten's. It is a lower register than his customary one. In sociolinguistic terms, this phenomenon of one speaker's adaptation to the other's speech and social class level in the attempt to reduce the social difference is called convergence (Gardiner 2008). This may occur due to people's awareness of the differences in speech patterns that unveil their social status, determining them to adjust their speaking style according to the interlocutor's (Spolsky 2010).

I daresay though that the highest register level a character is able to use stands for the sociolect integrating him/her into a social class, a professional group, conferring him/her a social status. Nevertheless, in the main hero's particular case, various register dimensions can be identified, ranging from the predominant high one to a quite low register, when carrying a face-to-face conversation with Cotten on matters with pregnant personal character.

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)

Still, there is a difference in the low register used by Stefano and the one used by Cotten. Stefano's speech contains features of the spoken language but not grammar mistakes. In contrast, Cotten speaks out utterances in incorrect English that exceed even the limits of slang. Cotten even writes to Stefano a note with incorrect grammatical agreement. Also, it is Cotten's sociolect that strikes from the beginning of the short-story, which heavily adds up to the conviction of his belonging to a certain social layer.

4. Analysis

The previous section presented the distinction that is to be made between the two voices that can be "heard" in the short-story. The aim here is to investigate whether the MA students' translations have preserved the same distinction in the characters' styles. The assessment of the translations is basically grounded on the use of different language varieties, thus also exploring the re-creative force in the young translators. The ultimate focus lies in checking whether the translations are functionally equivalent to the original. To this end, only two examples from the short-story are herein presented on account of their relevance in illustrating Cotten's particular sociolect. It is precisely this sociolect which displays the social difference between the interlocutors. Cotten's speech is marked either by carelessness or by ungrammaticality, clearly classifying him into a lower social class. Apart from the elliptical way of speaking which, taken alone, might be indicative of casual speech, striking examples of his social speech markers are exhibited in the way he expresses numbers. Not even these ones would be so striking were they not in sharp contrast to his interlocutor's manner of speaking. But the shift of style from one character to the other highlights the imperfections in the Negro's speech. Two occurrences of numerals make up Cotten's replies to Stefano's inquiries on prices that Cotten charges for different services: "Thutty dollars" and "Fo' hundrerd". Here is the analysis of the students' solutions to the first occurrence:

(1) "Thutty dollars" (Friedman 1983: 304)

The students' translations reveal that more than half of the target language versions identified Cotten's expression as a marker of his sociolect. But only seven out of these ten versions succeeded in finding an acceptable Romanian translation, in a form of the numeral that is sometimes encountered in careless speech:

(a) Treij de dolari

The other three versions, even though they indicate the students' awareness of the specificity of Cottens' utterance, are far from being natural and provide a rather alien feeling. The character is described to the target text reader either as a foreigner or as somebody unable to pronounce certain sounds, which would turn the sociolect into an idiolect and hence change the intended meaning. These incorrect and inappropriate translations are:

(b) Trej' de dolari
(c) Teizeci de dolari
(d) Treis de dolari

The remaining nine students erased Cotten's social marker by providing the correct Romanian numeral whether in letters or in figures. Since the possibility of an acceptable Romanian way of translation does exist – as in (a) above –, the neutralization of the hero's

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)

sociolect can only be explained by the students' lack of awareness as to the implications of the social context in translation.

The other numeral confirming Cotten's inability to use careless speech is:

(2) "Fo' hundred" (Friedman 1983: 309).

Here, the versions neutralizing the character's particular speech amount to twelve. However, whether these students were unaware of the relevance in preserving the particularity is questionable. As compared to the previous example, no pertinent equivalent seems to be available in Romanian to render a similarly deficient way of uttering the number 'patru' (four). In other words, using the plain, full numeral can be deemed as the obligatory option. Even if the other seven students realized the author's intention, six of them came up with unacceptable solutions in the attempt to hinder Cotten's 'exclusion' from the social class he belongs to. To exemplify but three of them:

(a) Pat' sute
(b) Patr' sute
(c) Pa-sute

One single noteworthy compensatory solution was given by the use of a Romanian slang word beside the full numeral:

(d) Patru foi.

Given that slang is associated to informal, low register, it is fairly suitable as a substitute for another informal register marker. 'Foi' is a Romanian slang word for paper money.

5. Conclusions

Neutralization has proved to be the predominant feature of the investigated instances of translated language. The literature outlines several considerations on the phenomenon of neutralization as a feature of target-language texts. According to Zlatnar Moe (2010), one of the facets of neutralization affects the social status of the characters and their interpersonal relations. It is this type of neutralization that the students' translations display. Since the translation of both characters' speech has been neutralized in terms of register, it results that their social positions converge towards the centre, the social gap between the characters being generally reduced in the translations.

In the second examples, as well as in others not presented herein, it was the obligatory option, in others the phenomenon occurred due to lack of awareness as to the role that the social context plays. Both causes explaining the neutralization of the characters' sociolects turn the author's efforts to socially label the heroes into a futile endeavour considering the alteration that it produces in the reception by the target-text reader. Moreover, given that the core topic of the text revolves around the social context, the neutralization in the target-language versions of the register markers attributed to the heroes cancel the innermost intended meaning. Thus, considerable losses are unwillingly determined even if the surface meaning is not affected. But such a shallow approach can incur serious damage to the message; instead, the deep meaning has to be pursued since it carries the essence, the author's ultimate intentions. It needs to be sought for at macro-

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)

contextual level. Therefore, the translation process of the short-story should have started with the students' internalizing the text so as to enable them to grasp the fine nuances.

An explanation for the pregnant neutral character of the translations as compared to the source-language text can lie in the fact that the tendency towards neutralization is stronger in learners than in professional translators (Künzli 2004). Some teaching and experience will have the power to settle things right.

It all boils down to fostering students' awareness of the importance of recognizing the social context and convincing them to allot more time to work out compensatory translation methods when structural and cultural differences between the languages involved in translation do not allow for similar ways of expression. Indeed, translation concerns not only linguistic matters but also cultural ones. In the case of *Black Angels*, the posited social context can be extended to a socio-cultural context. This is because the social context employed in the source-language variant is strictly related to the cultural aspect of the American perimeter where black and white people are in geographical co-habitation. Such cultural conditions are foreign to the Romanian culture. Hence, the cultural mismatch between the two worlds in contact. After all, as far as the particular racial issue raised by the short-story is concerned, there are no commonalities between the American world – in which the text was deployed – and the Romanian world. This requires of the translator to step out of the original cultural environment and force an alien cultural concern into a different culture. As with sundry non-transferable issues regarding language or culture, compromises will be made. It is only left for the translator then to strive to diminish the losses even if "[i]nescapable infidelity is presumed as a condition of the process" (Gentzler 1993).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arhire, M. and O. Tatu. 2012. "Dealing with Register and Style Translation Errors", in E. Buja and S. Măda (eds.) *SUM – Structure, Use, and Meaning. Linguistic Studies*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, pp. 23-34.

Bell, R.T. 1976. *Sociolinguistics: Goals, Approaches, and Problems*, London: Batsford.

Bonaffini, L. 1997. "Translating Dialect Literature", *World Literature Today*. 71.2, pp. 279-288.

Coposescu, L. 2002. *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. Brașov: Transilvania University

Publishing House.

Friedman, B. J. 1983. "Black Angels", in L. Rust Hills (ed.) *Great Esquire Fiction. The Finest*

Stories from the First Fifty Years, USA and Canada: Penguin Books, pp. 304-309.

Gardiner, A. 2008. *English Language*, London: Pearson Education Limited.

Genzler, E. 1993. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. London and New York: Routledge.

Hatim, B. and I. Mason. 1994. *Discourse and the Translator*. London and New York: Longman.

Holmes, J. 2008. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, U.K.: Longman.

Hudson, R. A. 1996. *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Künzli, A. 2004. "I find that a bit exaggerated - Neutralization in Translation", in A. Papaconstantinou (ed.) *Choice and Difference in Translation: The Specifics of Transfer*, Athens: The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, pp. 81-96.

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)

Spolsky, B. 2010. *Sociolinguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stubbs, M. 1983. *Discouse Analysis. The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language*, Chicago:

Blackwell.

Trudgill, P. 2000. *Sociolinguistics*: *An Introduction to Language and Society*. London: Penguin

Books.

Wardhaugh, R. 2010. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.

Wolf, M. 2007. "The emergence of a sociology of translation", in M. Wolf and A. Fukari (eds.)

Constructing a Sociology of Translation, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Zlatnar Moe, M. 2010. "Styling Popular Fiction: A Comparison of Stylistic Shifts in Slovene

Translations of Popular Fiction and Literary Prose", paper presented at IV Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Literarios de Cultura Popular, Mallorca, Viewable (August 2013) at: http://www.uibcongres.org/congresos/.

BDD-V105 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-28 00:52:15 UTC)