# *TRANSLATING CULTURE-BOUND LEXICAL UNITS: 'A TOUGH ROW TO HOE'*[1]

***Abstract:*** *Our experiences of the world are assumed to be filtered by language and culture to a great extent. Consequently, it is difficult to grasp and convey experiences that take place within a different system of filters, outside our own frames of reference. The present paper sets out to analyse the cultural dimension of translation, as illustrated in the translation of phraseological units, which are 'culture-bound' lexical units. The study examines actual practices of this type of translation that mediates cultural differences, while trying to reconcile respect for the cultural specificity with the desire to render the foreign familiar.*

***Keywords****: cultural translation, phraseological unit, cultural specificity.*

Most researchers, when studying translation problems related to multiple connotations, linguistic peculiarities and even cultural specificity, usually deal with the word level. With few exceptions, the phrase level has been quite entirely left out from studies on translation theory and practice. This is actually quite strange, given the fact that phraseology represents "one of the major pitfalls of translation", hindering both comprehension and translation of texts due to the complexity and rich cultural diversity of phraseological units. (Colson, 2008: 200) Phraseological units are based on vivid images and usually have distinct national flavour. And besides the often misleading connotations, there are all sorts of differences in scope, range, usage conventions, which are influenced by the source culture, which have to be taken into account in the translation process. So a great challenge that translators face when dealing with phraseology is how to retain the characteristic features of these units and at the same time accomplish the highest degree of cultural exchange.

## Culture and Phraseology

The correlation between language and culture or culture-specific ways of thinking has been first observed by Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It was later reformulated in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which sustains that "different languages lead their speakers to different

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conceptualisations of the same extra-linguistic reality, which seems to be most evident in the way that reality is segmented by the lexicon." (Skandera, 2007: V) It is generally accepted by linguists that a language, and especially its lexicon, influences its speakers' cultural patterns of thought and perception in various ways, for example through a culture-specific segmentation of the extra-linguistic reality, the frequency of occurrence of particular lexical items, or the existence of keywords or key word combinations revealing core cultural values.

Culture has been broadly defined as "the shared way of life of a group of people." (Sabban, 2007: 591) It has been characterised in terms of shared modes of experiencing the world, modes of social behaviour and interacting, attitudes and values, shared traditions, all which are part of the collective memory. These modes have been accumulated historically and are shared by the members of a society in a specific living environment. (Piirainen, 2007: 216) The extension of the concept of culture, i.e. the nation's history, geographical conditions, economy, social system, religion and customs, can also be reflected in its language.

In a language, phraseology is probably the major mechanism contributing to the formation and reinforcement of a cultural identity. (Cowie, 1998: 9) The phraseology of a language is deeply marked by its cultural patterns, and cultural connotations are especially vivid in idioms and proverbs. (Teliya, Bragina, Oparina, Sandomirskaya, 1998: 59)

The basic concept of phraseology is 'phraseological unit', which is probably the most widely used umbrella term. Phraseological units are "non-motivated word-groups that cannot be freely made up in speech, but are reproduced as ready-made units". (Ginzburg, cited in Cowie, 1998: 214) The main property of phraseological units is their non-compositionality: "the meaning arising from word-by-word interpretation of the string does not yield the institutionalised, accepted, unitary meaning of the string". (Moon, 1998: 8, 178) Lexico-grammatical fixedness or formal rigidity is another major characteristic. It implies some degree of lexico-grammatical defectiveness in units, for example with preferred lexical realisations and often restrictions on aspect, mood, or voice. (*Ibidem*, 7) Other characteristic features of phraseological units are: institutionalisation, common usage, polysemy, ambiguity, syntactic integrity (forming syntactic or grammatical units in their own right). (Moon, 1998: 8, 178; Corpas Pastor, 1996: 19, 20)

Phraseological units "emerge as a result of experiencing and conceptualizing particular situations in ways that are culturally determined". (Schönefeld, 2007: 138, 139) Most phraseological units reveal specific cultural modes and therefore their meaning is often strongly linked to the original cultural context. Hence, from the point of view of a non-native speaker, most phraseological units are quite unpredictable.

Cultural and intercultural aspects of phraseology have come to assume a central role in research in the field. The study of modern phraseology nowadays is considered inseparable from the cultural aspects of language. (Piirainen, 2007: 208) The cultural foundation of phraseology is now seen as having as important a role as



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aspects concerning its semantics and syntax, since phraseological units tend to absorb and accumulate cultural elements.

**Culture and Translation**

The concept of culture as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception is central to the skopos theory, and as such gave rise to the 'cultural turn' in translation studies in Germany during the mid-1980s. (Snell-Hornby, 2006: 55) Vermeer views translation as a cultural transfer rather than a linguistic one, that is why a translator is not only supposed to be bilingual, but also 'bicultural'. (cited in Snell-Hornby, 2006: 52) The definition that he proposes is: "a translation is not the transcoding of words or sentences from one language into another, but a complex form of action in which someone gives information about a text under new functional, cultural and linguistic conditions and in a new situation, while preserving formal aspects as far as possible." (*Ibidem*, 53)

There has been a recognition that culture-bound concepts can actually be more problematic for the translator than the semantic or syntactic difficulties of a text, even where the two cultures involved are not too distant. (Cordero cited in Leppihalme, 1997: 2) Culture-bound translation problems have been seen either in terms of extralinguistic phenomena (topography, flora, fauna, social institutions, buildings, trademarks etc.) or intralinguistic and pragmatic ones (idioms, puns, wordplay, ways of addressing a person, of apologizing etc.). (Leppihalme, 1997: 2) This recognition led to a growing interest in intercultural translation problems in the last decades.

Peter Newmark (1988: 78) claims that translation problems due to culture-specific items are caused by the context of a cultural tradition to which every language is bound, since there is no culturally neutral language. Mary Snell-Hornby (1988: 39-64) states that the translation process can no longer be envisaged as being between two languages, but between two cultures involving 'cross-cultural transfer'. She refers to translation studies as being a 'culturally oriented subject'. Venuti considers that "Every step of the translation process […] is mediated by the diverse cultural values that circulate in the target language." (cited in Dimitriu, 2006: 13)

These are just a few statements from the literature that clearly show that translation is no longer seen simply as a natural process of interlingual transfer. It goes beyond the code-switching process and involves a negotiation between source and target cultures. Like in the field of phraseology, the cultural aspects involved in translation have acquired great importance in modern research.



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**Translation Difficulties**

The translation of phraseological units is sensitive both to linguistic and cultural factors, since they are 'culture-bound' lexical units. Before the actual translation process begins, the translator has to face two important issues. A first problem that he has to deal with is the ability to recognise the presence of a phraseological unit in a text, since they are not always so obvious for a non-native. (Baker, 1992: 65)

Another problem which arises, especially in the case of culturally specific phraseological units, is the correct interpretation of the meaning. It can be a real challenge sometimes to capture the whole range of connotations they convey, and much more if the source and target cultures are considerably different. Mona Baker (1992: 66) presents two situations in which their meaning can be misinterpreted. A first case is when they seem transparent, because they offer a reasonable literal interpretation and their idiomaticity is not very obvious. For instance, there are many phraseological units that have both a literal and an idiomatic meaning, for example 'take someone for a ride' (deceive or cheat someone in some way). A second case is when a phraseological unit in the source language has a close counterpart in the target language which is similar on the surface, but has a completely different meaning. For example the English idiom 'from the horse's mouth' (straight from the source, from someone directly involved) and the Romanian one 'la botul calului' (in a great hurry).

A major difficulty in the translation of phraseological units is raised by the fact that languages have different ways of organising reality, which are specific to each culture. The lexical systems vary from language to language and the way languages express meaning cannot be easily predicted, since they are only occasionally similar to other languages. (*Ibidem*, 68) It is unrealistic to expect to find equivalent units in the target language for each and every one in the source text, so sometimes a phraseological unit might have no equivalent in the target language.

Even if a phraseological unit has a similar counterpart in the target language, its context of use may be different. For instance, the two expressions may have different connotations, or they may not be pragmatically transferable. (*Ibidem*, 69) For example, 'to make a pig of yourself' (eat and drink too much; be greedy) and 'a te face ca un porc' (get very dirty).

Phraseological units enclose the most peculiar characteristics of a language, displaying a high degree of cultural and linguistic specificity. (Corpas Pastor, 2003: 213) A great number of phraseological units have originated in socio-cultural, historic or ethnographic realities, which are specific to that linguistic community. These phraseological units are unique to a certain community of people and are not shared by other cultures, thus raising cultural difficulties. Mason says that "the cultural connotations of a word or expression cannot, in some cases, be translated; in other words, it is sometimes impossible to obtain a 'similar effect' in the target language readers, because that effect simply does not exist in their



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reality." (cited in Samaniego Fernández, 1996: 97) For instance, the British idiom 'to carry / take coals to Newcastle' (supply something that there is already a lot of).

Although the translation of phraseological units which contain culture-specific items raises great problems, Mona Baker claims that they are not necessarily untranslatable. (1992: 68) In her opinion it is not the specific items that an expression contains which can make it untranslatable or difficult to translate, but rather the meaning it conveys and its association with culture-specific contexts.

Gloria Corpas Pastor (2003: 213) emphasises yet another difficulty in the translation of phraseological units, which derives from their internal complexity. In most cases, they enclose a series of interrelated elements which makes it very difficult to reproduce in the target language the global meaning of the original lexical unit. She gives the example of the English phrase 'at full tilt' ('with great speed and/or force') and the Spanish one 'a toda vela'. Although they are considered equivalent forms, their meanings do not overlap entirely. Only the first meaning of the English unit appears in the Spanish one, that of 'with great velocity'. But its second meaning, 'with reckless abandon', is lost in the Spanish idiom. Moreover, the two idioms are based on two completely different images. However, this would only become an actual problem in a context where the author used the idiom in a word play or made reference to both meanings.

Translation difficulties also arise when phraseological units are used in the source text in both their literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. (Baker, 1992: 69) In such cases, unless the target-language phrase corresponds to the source-language one both in form and in meaning, the intended effect cannot be successfully reproduced. For example, the English idiom 'cut the mustard' (to be as good as expected or required), which could be taken both in its literal and idiomatic meaning, and the Romanian counterpart 'a te potrivi de minune'.

There are several other elements that can be different in the source and target languages, thus adding to the complexity of the translation process. For instance, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using phraseological units in a given register or text type may vary greatly from one language to another. This would include the very convention of using phraseological units in written discourse, the contexts in which they can be used, or their frequency of use. (Baker, 1992: 70) For example, English uses idioms in many types of texts, like in advertisements, promotional materials, tabloids etc., while in other languages their use is restricted only to certain texts. Therefore, when dealing with phraseological units, more than in the case of any other feature of language, high sensitivity to the rhetorical nuances of the target language is required. (*Ibidem*, 71).

## Strategies of Translation

Equivalence is the central strategy in any process of translation, and, more than in any other case, in the translation of phraseological units. According to



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Vinay & Darbelnet it is a procedure which "replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording". (cited in Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997: 51) They consider that phraseological units constitute perfect illustrations of equivalence. The translator is supposed to get a global view of the meaning of the phraseological unit, without paying much attention to its lexical or syntactic structure. For example, they say there is equivalence between the English idiom 'like a bull in a china shop' and the French 'comme un chat dans un jeu de quilles'.

The most fortunate case is that of total equivalence, when the phraseological unit found is of similar meaning and form to the one in the source language. The target language equivalent unit should cover the same denotative and connotative meaning as the original one and consist of equivalent lexical items. Furthermore, it should also have roughly the same communicative function, stylistic features, emotional impact and similar metaphoric image. (Baker, 1992: 72) This case, however, is not very frequent.

E.g.: 'When the cat's away, the mice will play' – 'Când pisica nu-i acasă, şoarecii joacă pe masă'

However, finding the right equivalent for a phraseological unit in the target language does not necessarily lead to a successful translation, although it is a fundamental requirement. There are other factors which have to be taken into consideration in the translation of phraseological units, like register, style, rhetorical effect, the alterations and manipulations in form and/or meaning that they might suffer in certain contexts, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of usage and frequency in a given context. (*Ibidem*, 72) This is why Mona Baker warns that this strategy, finding a fixed expression of similar meaning and similar form in the target language, may seem to offer the ideal solution, but this is not necessarily always the case.

A less demanding strategy is that of partial equivalence, when the phraseological unit has similar meaning, but dissimilar form, consisting of different lexical items, morpho-syntactic structures and/or stylistic features. This is actually the most frequently used strategy in the case of the translation of phraseology. (*Ibidem*, 74) Some linguists offer a variant for this strategy: add a footnote in which give the literal translation of the original phraseological unit, for the target language readers to have the opportunity to familiarise with it. (Privat, 1998: 324)

E.g.: 'By ignorance we mistake, and by mistakes we learn' – 'Greşind învaţă omul'

Werner Koller (2007: 605) uses the term 'substitution equivalence' for the cases when the lexical structures are different, but there is absolutely no difference in the connotative values. An example could be 'he that reckons without his host must reckon twice' and 'socoteala de acasă nu se potriveşte cu cea din târg'. By 'partial equivalence' he understands the presence of minor differences in the lexical meaning and/or syntactic structure and/or connotative values. He gives the example of 'buy a pig in a poke' and 'die Katze im Sack kaufen'.



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In the cases when an equivalent cannot be found in the target language, there are several strategies that can be applied. A first one is the literal translation of the phraseological unit (which could be seen as a type of equivalence in which the form is similar, but the meaning is different). It has also been called pseudo-equivalence. However, this solution is not accepted by most linguists, especially in the case of the translation of phraseological units, where the global meaning is not made up by the sum of the meanings of its component parts. It is considered a mistake, since it does not remain true to the spirit of the original and deprives the phraseological unit of its semantic, stylistic, phonetic specificity. (Ruiz Gurillo, 2001: 93) Sometimes the meaning may be roughly similar to that of the source language, but most times it deviates completely from it, presenting different or even antagonistic situations, since, in some cases, it is based on the so called 'false friends' analogy. It could only be acceptable in the cases when the phraseological units have transparent meanings, which can be easily grasped, but this is not a very frequent case.

E.g.:'Money has no smell', translated as 'Banii n-au miros'

The translation by paraphrase is considered a more adequate strategy than the literal translation. It has also been referred to as zero equivalence. It corresponds to what Vinay and Darbelnet call 'transposition', which is "the process of replacing one word class with another without changing the meaning of the message". (cited in Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997: 190) In the case of a phraseological unit, it is substituted by a string of words, with no idiomatic character, which expresses the global sense conveyed by the original unit. In this case, the meaning is rendered, although the formal aspect, including the stylistic effect produced by the phraseological unit, is lost. It is also a good solution when the use of phraseological units in the target language text does not seem appropriate because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages. (Baker, 1992: 74)

Many times this strategy is accompanied by explicitation, the process through which information in the target text is made more explicit than in the original. This includes adding explanatory phrases, adding footnotes, spelling out implicatures, in order to increase readability. (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997: 55) This can be especially useful in the case of phraseological units that contain or allude to cultural elements, which cannot be easily captured by the target language reader.

For the translation of phraseological units which contain culture-bound elements there are several strategies that can be used, especially when the expression is paraphrased. Rodica Dimitriu considers that cultural plurality "has given rise to specific translation strategies through which cultural difference is highlighted." (2006: 29) Two such strategies are 'transcription' (cultural borrowing or assimilation), or what Newmark (1988: 81) calls 'transference', and 'calque' (literal translation). The purpose of these strategies is to retain some local colour, but while the second one does not completely block comprehension, in the first one



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the message will in most cases be at best vague, if not entirely opaque. For this reason Newmark (1988: 81, 82) mentions that it is a good practice to employ two or more translation strategies at the same time, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. For example, 'transference' is usually accompanied by 'naturalisation' (the adaptation of the cultural item to the pronunciation and morphological norms of the target language). There are other strategies that can be used for different purposes: 'neutralisation', in which case the cultural flavour is lost, but the meaning becomes clear. It can be in the form of either translation by a more general item (a superordinate) or by a more neutral, less expressive item. (Baker, 1992: 26, 28)

E.g.: 'a jack of all trades' (a person who can do many different kinds of work, but perhaps does not do them very well) – 'om bun la toate' (neutralisation)

Or the translator might opt for 'cultural substitution', by replacing the culture-specific item with a target language one which does not have the same meaning, but is likely to have a similar impact on the target reader. (*Ibidem*, 31)

E.g.: 'Work like a beaver' – 'A munci ca o furnică'

Another strategy is the translation by omission, when a phraseological unit may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text. This strategy can be used either because it has no adequate equivalent, it cannot be easily paraphrased or for stylistic reasons. (*Ibidem*, 77)

This strategy is usually accompanied by compensation, which is seen as "the technique of making up for the translation loss of important source text features by approximating their effects in the target text through means other than those used in the source text". (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997: 25) In this case, the omission of a phraseological unit at some point in a target text can be compensated by the introduction of another unit in a different part of the text, thus maintaining the idiomatic character of the text. This type of compensation is referred to as compensation in place.

## Concluding Remarks

Languages lead their speakers to construe experience in different ways, specific to their culture. (Ellis, 2008: 8) As a consequence, a great challenge that the translator faces in the case of phraseological units is to reconcile respect for the cultural specificity with the desire to render the foreign familiar. The aim is to make them available to someone unfamiliar with the culture, without destroying the cultural images on which they are based. In the translation of phraseology, perhaps more than in any other type, the translator becomes a real mediator between cultures and languages. And this is beyond a doubt 'a tough row to hoe'.



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