'PLEASE DO NOT CRACK SKULL...!'[1] – A GLIMPSE AT (G)LOCALIZED ENGLISH

Mariana Neagu

'Language is the source of misunderstandings.' (Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince*)

Abstract: Using examples of entertaining signs, directions, publicity materials and hotel notices which prove to be fertile territories for the misuse of English abroad, the paper focuses on minor varieties of English that seem to have been neglected in translation theory and practice. More specifically, we look at the registers mentioned above with a view to discuss three major types of translation problems: pragmatic translation problems (including culture-bound terms and space restrictions), intercultural translation problems (arising from differences between formal conventions, text-type conventions, conventional forms of address) and interlingual translation problems (arising from structural differences in vocabulary and syntax).

Keywords: glocalization, genre, discourse, register, text-type, translation

1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of this paper will explore recent thinking on the notions of genre, discourse, register, text and context and examine the extent to which these notions have explicitly or implicitly informed current thinking on translation and interpreting. In its practical part we will discuss various examples taken from Charlie Crocker's *Still Lost in Translation. More Misadventures in English Abroad* in terms of the systematic-functional model of language.

Systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), as its name suggests, considers function and semantics as the basis of human language and communicative activity. Unlike structural approaches that privilege syntax, SFL-oriented linguists begin an analysis with social context and then look at how language acts upon, and is constrained and influenced by, this social context. Systemic Functional (SF) theory views language as a systematic resource for expressing meaning in context. "The value of a theory," Halliday wrote, "lies in the use that can be made of it, and I have always considered a theory of language to be essentially consumer oriented" (1985: 7). SF theory states that particular aspects of a given context (such as the topics discussed, the language users and the medium of communication) define the meanings likely to be expressed and the language likely to be used to express those meanings.

Despite the apparenly entertaining aspect of the title, the paper has a serious goal, that is, to discuss some peculiarities of varieties of English used intranationally in the context of the so called *glocalization*, a concept which reconciles the two opposing approaches of globalization, i.e. one involving homogeneity and the other – cultural heterogeneity. Actually, the same opposing views show up in the two paradigms of English in the world: the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) view and the World Englishes (WE) view. We do not intend to discuss the current debates about these two concepts but rather to examine the complex task of a translator by raising the following questions:

(1) Does culture impose itself on a text?
(2) To what extent and in what ways are certain text types affected by culture?

[1] The title was inspired by the following language mangler found in Charlie Crocker's book *Still Lost in Translation. More Misadventures in English Abroad* (2007: 25): Please not to crack skull on bottom of pond. If do so, alarm hotel manager at once (Shanghai).

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

As we follow those who argue that Lingua Franca English communication does not have to exclude native speakers of English we believe that users' awareness of conventional situation types facilitates communication in general and cross-cultural communication in particular. This is why in the next section we briefly consider the notions of *genre, discourse, context, register* and *text.*

2. Genre, discourse, context, register, and text

The term ***genre***, imported into linguistics from literary and rhetorical analysis, has been appropriated to describe different spoken and written communicative events. Nunan (2007: 209) defines genre as a purposeful, socially constructed oral or written text such as a narrative, a casual conversation, a poem, a recipe, or a description. Genres are texts used in a particular situation for a particular purpose. (Trosborg 1997: 6)

Each genre has its own characteristic structure and grammatical form that reflects its social purpose. Genre constraints operate at the level of (discourse) structure.For example, recipes typically contain a list of ingredients followed by a set of instructions, the typical grammatical form for English being the imperative.

It is known that genres reflect the cultural context within which they are constructed; therefore genre and generic membership play an important role in the process of transfer between semiotic systems (Hatim and Mason 1992: 70). That this is so we will see later, when we analyse a set of texts and show that what is appropriate in a SL genre can become totally superfluous within the conventions of the TL genre.

Concerning ***discourse***, Hatim and Mason (1992: 70) consider it an expression of an attitude towards a subject (e.g. a book review is evaluative), a mode of talking and thinking which, like genre, can become ritualized. Woods (2006) looks at discourse as real language in use or language plus context – by which she means our experience, assumptions and expectations, the context we change in our relationships with others, etc.

The interrelationship between *genre and discourse* is also culturally determined, i.e. different cultures allow for different combinations. Equally, there are constraints on which discourses go with which genres and vice versa (e.g. a bureaucratic discourse will be resented at popular mass gatherings). In other words, genre constraints operate at the level of discourse structure.

In the construction of meaning, ***context*** plays a crucial role and it has often been considered under two separate headings, i.e. context of situation and context of culture. A key concept in Halliday's (1985) approach, ***the context of situation*** is the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning. It focuses on the various elements (the setting or social environment, the identity of the participants) involved in the direct production of meanings in a particular instance of communication. ***The context of culture*** is a broader background against which the text has to be interpreted. It is the institutional and ideological background that gives value to the text and constrains its interpretation. It includes the traditions, the institutions, the discourse communities, the historical context and the knowledge base of the participants (which may be mono-cultural, cross-cultural or multicultural). Cultural and situational elements are often so closely intertwined that it is extremely difficult to see them in isolation. While genre relates to the context of culture, register relates to the context of situation.

Register is a use-related variety of language (Halliday and Hasan 1989), a functional language variation. Registers comprise an open-ended set of varieties (or styles) of language typical of occupational fields, such as the language of religion, the language of legal documents, the language of newspaper reporting, medical language, technical language, etc. (Trosborg 1997: 5).

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

One register may be realized through various genres. For example, the legal register may comprise the language of the law in legal documents (legislative texts, contracts, wills), the language of the courtroom, (the judge declaring the law, judge/counsel interchanges, counsel/witness interchanges), the language of legal textbooks, and various types of lawyers' communication with other lawyers and with laymen. Registers impose constraints at the linguistic level of vocabulary and syntax. Hence, a very interesting point to make relative to how a given register is identified is the presence of collocations (of two or more lexical items) rather than the occurence of isolated items. We will come back to this idea in the practical part of this paper.

Concerning the notion of ***text***, it has often been viewed as a static concept – the product of a process - while discorse has been used to refer to a dynamic notion – the process of text production and text comprehension. For SF linguists the text is the unit of analysis because the functional meaning potential of language is realized in units no smaller than texts. Of course, the study of texts is typically performed by examining elements of the lexicogrammar and phonology, but these smaller units must be viewed from the perspective of their contribution to the meanings expressed by the total text in context. "For a linguist, to describe language without accounting for text is sterile; to describe text without without relating it to language is vacuous". (Halliday 1985: 10).

A ***text type*** is a macro-structure which essentially encompasses the purposes for which utterances are used. In recent years, texts have been classified on the basis of a predominant rethorical function into expository, argumentative, persuasive and instructional texts. A clear cut classification of text types is something idealized because most, if not all texts are hybrids. The predominence of a given rhetorical purpose in a given text is an important clue for assesing text-type identity. Rheorical purpose is important not only in defining norms but also in spotting deviations which must be heeded and preserved in translation. Besides the register dimension, texts and their translations may be seen from the perspective of the wider context of culture. Hatim and Munday (2006: 76) argue that factors such as the communicative event within which a text is embedded (genre) and the ideological statements which a text makes (discourse) become crucial parameters in the effective production and reception of texts and in the evaluation of translations.

3. Register variables and their role in text translation

3.1 Field, tenor, and mode

As we have shown earlier, the primary construct for explaining linguistic variation is register. Register is important in systemic linguistics because it is seen as the linguistic consequence of interacting aspects of context, which Haliday calls "field, tenor, and mode." These concepts serve to interpret the social context of a text, the environment in which meanings are being exchanged. (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 12). More importantly, we believe and will give evidence later that problems involved in translating a text into another language come from failing to establish equivalent terminology in the appropriate field, to achieve TL expression in the appropriate mode and tenor.

The field of discourse can roughly be associated with the subject matter of the text. Martin (2001: 152-153) exemplifies fields by activities such as tennis, opera, linguistics, cooking, building construction, farming, politics, education and so on. However, fields can be characterisied by a variety of subject matters (e.g. political discourse as a field may be about law and order, taxation or foreign policy). From a translator's perspective, field can become a problem when working from a source language such as English – which has developed a

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

scientific and technical culture and consequently, marked fields of discourse, – into target languages in the developing world.

The tenor of discourse is related to the social roles and relationships between participants in a speech situation; it includes relations of formality, power and affect. The degree of power between two interactants will determine how a particular communicative event is carried out, and will be marked linguistically. Crystal (1992) shows that Halliday's *tenor* refers to the relations among participants in a language activity, especially the level of formality they adopt (colloquial, formal, etc.). The term *tenor* stands out as a roughly equivalent term for *style* which is a more specific alternative used by linguists to avoid ambiguity. In our opinion, a translator should not forget that components of tenor such as formality, informality and power distance are also dimensions of cultural values in some societies.

The mode of discourse refers to the medium or channel of communication: spoken, written, written to be spoken, etc. For translation and interpreting studies, this variable is of relevance in many circumstances, for example when films are subtitled and certain phonological features of mode have to be represented in writing.

3.2 Looking for equivalent terminology in the appropriate field

In our collection of mistranslated signs and notices selected from Charles Crocker's book, *Still Lost in Translation. More Misadventures in English Abroad,* 10 examples out of 64 pertain to the field of cooking. Here are some samples of 'gems' found on menu lists, normally characterized by the referential function of language which involves objectivity and non-ambiguity, features neglected in most of the texts:

(1) Strong soup with **added materials**. (Hungarian Menu list)
(2) **Hen food** (Menu list in Iran).
(3) Stewed **language** in assorted prinkles (Spain)
(4) **Cheesebugger** and chips. (Meat dish on a menu list, Greece)
(5) **Instantenous** steak . (Minute steak on a 1960s menu in Mozambique).
(6) **Smashed pots**. (Menu list, Greece)

The lexical choices above, given in bold type, are clearly inappropriate in terms of the field of discourse, as are the following notices:

(7) In **carriage of eating** do not not sit on floor with legs crossed, as in house. Sit on chair and eat **from table**. Servant girl **bring** tea and **uneatables.** (On Chinese train)
(8) In your room you will find a mini bar which is filled with **alcoholics.** (Munich)
(9) **Frozen ice** available here (Toledo, Spain)
(10) At once, it is added the desired **culinary** vegetables and the water. **Salt at will**. ... The fire is **vivified** until the culinary vegetables and the **flesh meat** may be well cooked, without it leaves one moment to boil. (instructions to cook paella).

The phenomenon of redundancy, obvious in *frozen ice* (example 9) and *flesh meat* (example 10) also occurs in other texts:

(11) Please do not **graffitti on the wall** or anywhere. (At Hirosaki Castle, Japan)
(12) Please **proceed forward** with being directed by museum officials. (At Hirosaki Castle, Japan)

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

(13) **Take care**! Fall into water **carefully**. (Beside the Black Dragon Pool, a lake near Lijang).
(14) Do not **litter** the **trash** around. (Sign at Chinese University)

Examples (11) and (14) are both negative directives, i.e. they direct people not to do something, but, while the former contains the politeness marker *please*, the latter is a simple imperative. As we have mentioned earlier, sometimes directives are accompanied by an explanation or justification, a form of politeness which gives details or reason, as in the following:

(15) Please not to dive in hotel swim pond. Bottom of pond very hard, and not far from top of water.(Shanghai)
(16) The use of the swimming pool is forbidden while contageous disease **is suffered**. (Hotel in Punta Umbria).

Sometimes, justification (vindication) in directives is foregrounded, probably for the purpose of imparting the sentence a milder tone, so that the interactant who has the power to make directives can allow the other some face[2]:

(17) To protect cultural relic **no carving**. (Sign at ruins, Beijing)
(18) In order to keep fit **no spitting**. (Sign at ruins, Beijing)

Another sign containing an explanation is a concocted apology, also found in Crocker's collection of language manglers:

(19) Sorry for the condition of our toilets, this is due to a **car accident** (A public house in Dungeness, Kent).

This singular statement, produced by a native speaker, is characterized by a logical rather than a linguistic flaw, in that it contains the so-called ‚non sequitur' type of reasoning in which logical leaps include the omission of various stages between cause and effect.

The explanation of what went wront in the apology above is highly unexpected and an interesting question it could raise concerns not so much the culture-specific face-saving device, but the source of humour in the apology. Besides, we believe example (19) confirms Clyne's opinion that "Europeans will apologize in such a way as to avoid losing face. This puts both Europeans and South-east Asians at variance with Anglo-Australians, who occupy the middle ground in that they tend to apologize as a formality according to conventions of politeness but do not make a 'big deal' out of it" (Clyne 1994: 84).

Ellipsis

Opposite to the redundant expressions above are the so-called underdetermined linguistic expressions, i.e. expressions that can only make full sense if completed with contextual material.

[2] The notion of *face*, derived from Goffman and further developped by Brown and Levinson (1987) ties in with the expression *lose face* (to be embarrasssed or humiliated. The notion acknowledges politeness as ritual and maintaining face in interaction is the central element in commoly accepted notions of politeness.

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

(20) The main difference of a wall and a street side room is about the view. (On website of a hotel in Istambul)
(21) Jerusalem – there's no such city! (Tourism brochure trying to say Jerusalem – there's no city like it!)
(22) Heads Cutting Y 1500. For Bald Men Y 900 (Japanese Barber)
(23) Nail remover (On bottle of Japanese nail polish remover).

The common argument that usually accounts for the use of ellipsis is space restrictions imposed by the channel or **mode of discourse**. What the producers of the above-mentioned texts seem to have overlooked is semantic and grammatical knowledge about words that can be omitted.

3.2 Culture-sensitivity reflected by tenor

Besides poor knowledge of TL vocabulary and grammar, some of the mistranslated texts collected by Charles Crocker also display some flaws pertaining to the interpersonal domain, to what has earlier been referred to as **tenor of discourse. Tenor** subsumes aspects of power and solidarity and thus caters for social distance. In the analysis of ***interpersonal meaning*****,** two basic types of relationship may be distinguished: power and solidarity. Power emanates from the text producer's ability to impose his or her plans at the expense of the text receiver's plans. Solidarity, on the other hand, is the willingness of the text producer genuinely to relinquish power and work with his or her interlocutors as members of a team.

Instruction in itself constitutes a face-tratening act, namely "an act which runs contrary to the face wants of the addresee and/or of the speaker". (Brown and Levinson 1987: 65). Requests, orders, threats, suggestions and advice are instances of acts which represent a threat to negative face, i.e. that aspect of face pertaining to a person's desire to have the freedom to act without being imposed upon. In order to avoid or minimize face-threatening activities, participants in interaction usually select from a set of strategies involving a higher or lower degree of politeness. Although politeness itself is a universal phenomenon, politeness strategies and individual speech acts may vary from one language/culture to another, as can be noted in the following cases of distorted translations:

(24) The visitor **halts**! (Restricted access sign, Yonghe Temple, Beijing)
(25) Please **treasure** the grass. (At tourist attraction, Hinan Island, China)
(26) Smoking **should be prohibited** inside these facilities. (At Hirosaki Castle, Japan)

The imperative directive in example (24) because of its unusual form in the third person singular, can be interpreted as a form of indirectness favoured in the Chinese culture. In (25) the meaning of the verb *treasure* contains an expressive dimension which sounds odd in English, in an operative (directive) text, i.e a text type in which the focus is on the formation of future behaviour, either with option or without option. The use of *should* in (26) shows that the sign is translated only informatively, neglecting the perlocutionary effect conveyed by the plain English equivalent "No smoking!"

To conclude at this point, we believe that the clumsy translations of the ***directives*** *Restricted access*, *Keep off the grass* and *No smoking* in examples (24) – (26) can be accounted for from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective. Following Wierzbicka (2003) and Trosborg (1995) we argue that in different countries, people may speak in different ways – not only because they use different linguistic codes involving different lexicons and different grammars, but also because their ways of using codes are different. The cultural norms

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

reflected in speech acts may differ from one language to another. As it is known, English cultural norms favour ***indirectness*** in acts aiming at bringing about an action from the addressee. Although the Chinese and Japanese cultural norms also encourage indirectness as exemplified in (25) and (26), these forms of indirectness are rather different from those cultivated in the Anglo-Saxon culture.

Discussing written discourse across cultures, Clyne (1994: 170) maintains that in Japanese, in contrast to English, the emphasis is far more on content than on form and the return to the baseline theme is obligatory. In the following example (also taken from our selection) we see how Japanese discourse suggests possibilities, while English discourse argues ideas:

(27) You had better deposit your baggage into the charge free lockers or it will be ours. But we are not interested in your camera. We do not like to be stared at our eyes. If you do so, we are not responsible for what will happen. We do not hope to be such a monkey. Please, refrain from feeding us. (In Japanese national park containing monkeys).

4. Problems of reference and ambiguity

Reference is a semantic relation in which the source of interpretation of some element is to be sought elsewhere; with elsewhere in the text as a special case. (Halliday 2002: 40). Pronouns are regarded as cohesive devices when used anaphorically. They have variable reference and sometimes one can select an unlikely candidate for the referent as in (28):

(28) Mr. Word can't open the file ... probably **he** is damaged. (Error message, Japan).

Ambiguity is the semantic characteristic of lexical items and syntactic structures of allowing for more than one semantic interpretation in a certain context, a case in which the interpreter of a certain piece of linguistic discourse encounters difficulties in mentally processing the meaning of the message. Ambiguity can be a lexical phenomenon, arising from homonymy or polysemy or syntactic, arising from the possibility of alternative constituent structures.

Syntactic ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure, such as the sentence *Visiting relatives can be boring*. This type of ambiguity is also said to be structural because a phrase or sentence can be represented in two structurally different ways: [Visiting relatives] can be boring, i.e. Relatives that visit us can be boring and Visiting [relatives] can be boring, i.e. To visit relatives can be boring.

Syntactic ambiguity commonly arises because of a prepositional phrase placed at the end of the sentence, as in example (29), produced by a native speaker:

(29) Will you have any guest wishing to take bath, please make arrangements to have one **with Mrs. Harvey**. (Small Hotel, Cornwall, UK)

5. Conclusions

The examples discussed in the paper (except for 19 and 29) have been meant to point to the four classes of translation problems identified by Nord (1997: 58): (a) pragmatic (b) intercultural (c) interlingual and (d) text-specific.

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)

Pragmatic translation problems (PTP) arise from the difference between two communicative situations: the Source Text (ST) situation and the Target Text (TT) situation (example 15).

Intercultural translation problems (CTP) refer to text-type conventions and general conventions of style. In examples (24-26) we have seen different conventional forms of address that do not fit very well in the Target culture.

Interlingual translation problems (LTP) are caused by structural differences in vocabulary (examples 1-10) and syntax (examples 16-18).

Text-specific translation problems (TTP) are those problems that arise in the translation of one specific text and whose solution cannot be generalized, although it is also based on functional criteria. This category, including the translation of metaphors, similes, puns, rhetorical figures has been analysed elsewhere (Neagu 2005, forthcoming).

Like in any functional translation, in the translation of notices and signs, problems should therefore be approached starting on the pragmatic level, taking into account the addresee's background knowledge, expectations, communicative needs, medium restrictions and ending with context-bound decisions .

Mariana Neagu
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați
Department of English
mariana.neagu@ugal.ro

References

Brown, P., Levinson, P. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clyne, M. 1994. *Inter-cultural Communication at Work. Cultural Values in Discourse.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crocker, C. 2008. *Still Lost in Translation. More Misadventures in English Abroad.* London: Arrow Books.

Crystal, D. 1992. *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Halliday, M. A. K. 1985. *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K. 2002. *Linguistic Studies of Text and Discourse*, edited by Jonathan Webster. London/New York: Continuum.

Halliday, M. A. K, Hasan, R. 1989. *Language, Context and Aspects of Language in Social Semiotic Perspective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hatim, B., Mason, I. 1992. *Discourse and the Translator.* London: Longman.

Hatim, B., Munday, J. 2006. *Translation. An Advanced Resource Book*. London/New York: Routledge.

Martin, J. 2001. Language, register and genre. In A. Burns and C. Coffin (eds.), *Analysing English in a Global Context*, 149-166. London: Routledge.

Neagu, M. (ed.) 2005. *Understanding and Translating Metaphor*. Bucureşti: Editura didactică şi pedagogică.

Neagu, M. (forthcoming) On the (un)translatability of puns. In D. Popa (ed.), *Humour and Laughter. Theory and Applications.* Galați: Galați University Press

Nord, C. 1997. A functional typology of translations. In A. Trosborg (ed.), *Text Typology and Translation,* 43-65. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Nunan, D. 2007. *What Is This Thing Called Language?* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nunan, D. 2008. Exploring genre and register in contemporary English. *English Today* 24 (2): 56-61.

Saraceni, M. 2008. English as a lingua franca: Between form and function. *English Today* 24 (2): 20-26.

Trosborg, A. 1995. *Interlanguage Pragmatics. Requests, Complaints and Apologies.* Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Trosborg, A. (ed.) 1997. *Text Typology and Translation.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Wierzbicka, A. 2003 [1991]. *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics. The Semantics of Human Interaction*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Woods, N. 2006. *Describing Discourse. A Practical Guide to Discourse Analysis*. London: Hodder Arnold.

BDD-A9799 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:34 UTC)