ON THE NECESSITY OF PRECIOUS TERMS: EUPHEMISMS AND CULTURE SPECIFIC ELEMENTS

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Abstract: The present paper aims at debating upon the necessity of such controversial terms as euphemisms and culture specific elements. Thus, the article wishes to be perceived as an explanatory defence-attempt regarding euphemisms as mark of the 'politically correct' social imposition upon language or of the special extra-care imposed by the translation of the culture specific elements. Moreover, we intend to underline the power words can be endowed with and the varied images they can enhance.

Keywords: communication, power of words, context, meaning, linguistic evolution

Ever since the beginning of the world, people tried to make themselves understood in order to be able to communicate, to show belonging to their fellows, to survive; they used all kinds of signs, verbal signs, under the form of sounds that in time became more and more specialised, turning into words or written signs, starting from wall paintings in caves to the most elaborate writings.

Words have always been the transporter of our ideas and just as we have evolved as human species, so did words. We have been given the opportunity to have access to information, thus win knowledge and become more and more able to deal with words, make them speak, make them act, make them react and express our minds. We have been witnessing the evolution of words, the power they have continuously been endowed with along human evolution. Words have been known to save or to destroy lives, since they carry an entire upload of cultural- and social-bound significance.

That is the reason we chose to approach the case of special kind of words, those precious words, that 'tell-a-story' type of words: this article deals only with euphemisms, culture specific elements.

In a completely random order, we will discuss these terms from several perspectives: from the point of view of their necessity in language, in the social aspect of a language; from the perspective of their power to suggest and to impress; from the point of view of their resistance to transfer due to the aesthetic and national values they are endowed with.

First, *euphemisms*: judging by its etymology, the term is considered to be in use since the 1650s, from Greek *euphemismos* referring to the "use of a favourable word in place of an inauspicious one," from *euphemising* "speak with fair words, use words of good omen," from eu- "good" (see eu-) +pheme "speaking," from phanai "speak"[1].

In Ancient Greece, the superstitious folk would avoid the usage of ill-omen during religious ceremonies, or even the names of Gods, "since their names were considered identical with them", and "to speak a name was to evoke the divinity whose power then had to be confronted." Therefore, it was the priests' role to devise special terms, "indirect forms of reference to calm the spirit or avert the wrath of a deity".[2]

Whether to be dated back to the 16th century (George Blunt used the term *euphemism* in English in the early 1580s[3]) or to the 18th century (the terms seems to be attested in 1793

[1] acc. to http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=euphemism
[2] Judith S. Neaman and Carole G. Silver, *The Wordsworth Book of Euphemisms*, Wordsworth Reference, 1990, pp.1-2
[3] idem, p. 4

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according to other sources[4]), it is commonly acknowledged that the term "may be used to avoid words considered rude, while still conveying their meaning; words may be replaced by similar-sounding words, gentler words, or placeholders. Some euphemisms have become accepted in certain societies for uncomfortable information.[5]

As it appears, it is, from the very beginning quite difficult to establish with perfect accuracy what a euphemism really is: according to Judith S. Neaman and Carole G. Silver[6], "(...) vulgarisms, slangs, acronyms, jargon and technical terminology may indeed be euphemistic. Much (...) depends on the speaker and his audience. For example, a vulgarism may become a euphemism when it is less distressing to the speaker and the listener than the more orthodox term it disguises. (…) Last, the speaker who utters a word, the conditions under which it is uttered and the person to whom it is addressed will often determine whether that word is a euphemism." This only proves that the linguistic item we are debating upon here is, by all means, context-biased: socio-economic context, linguistic context, psychological context.

According to Lynn Schnider[7], „A euphemism is 'the substitution of a mild, indirect or vague term for one considered to be harsh, blunt, or offensive'. Sometimes called *doublespeak*, a euphemism is a word or phrase which pretends to communicate but doesn't. It makes the bad seem good, the negative seem positive, the unnatural seem natural, the unpleasant seem attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids, shifts or denies responsibility. It conceals or prevents thought." They say that "Good words cost nothing and are worth much"[8], meaning that they are endowed with the power to soothe, to make the 'unbearable bearable'. Words cannot, in themselves, change things but, since humans are easily and highly sensitive and responsive beings, the effect and the result, the reaction to the events performed by humans is undoubtedly affected by words.

There is even an explanation as to why this interesting and resourceful linguistic event as the *euphemism* appeared in the first place: psychologists consider that "meaning can be defined as the sum of our responses to a word or an object. Words themselves may be seen as responses to stimuli. After a word has been associated for a long period of time with the stimulus that provokes it, the word itself picks up aspects of the response elicited by the stimulus object. When unpleasant elements of response attach themselves strongly to the word used to describe them, we tend to substitute another word free of these negative associations."

Somehow, this might imply that we tend to prefer niceness, pleasant sounds in order to actually 'lie' to ourselves or to others elegantly. That is why it appears to be so much more acceptable, easy to tolerate to hear these precious terms; instead of admitting that we live in a *slum* we prefer in *substandard housing*, or in *an economically depressed neighborhood*, or *culturally deprived environment*. Instead of saying that we bought a used car, we say we purchase a *pre-enjoyed* or *pre-loved vehicle*, probably made of *genuine imitation leather*, actually meaning cheap vinyl. This only means telling ourselves *committed terminological inexactitudes*, or *relayed misinformation*, *misspoke* or be *economical with the truth*, when what we do is knowingly, undertakingly mislead ourselves.[9]

Here's a list of juicy euphemisms picked from George Carlins's speech[10].

[4] http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=euphemism
[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism
[6] Judith S. Neaman and Carole G. Silver, *op. cit*, p. viii
[7] http://lynnschneiderbooks.com/2011/12/23/20-examples-of-great-euphemisms/
[8] acc. to http://www.bartleby.com/345/authors/396.html
[9] acc. to idem
[10] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuEQixrBKCc

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Toilet paper = bathroom tissue
False teeth = dental appliances
Partly cloudy = partly sunny
Used cars = previously owned transportations
Room service = guest room dining
Constipation = occasional irregularity
Hospital = health maintenance organisation
To be broke = to have a negative cash flow position
To get fired = management wanting to curtail redundancies in the Human Resources area

Needless to say, the list displaying euphemisms is indeed, endless. So is our interest in such a delightful linguistic event. We are quite sure that, judging by the evolution of this phenomenon, it will surely continue to develop into new and resourceful meanings. This can but please an avid consumer of such linguistic displays.

Secondly, dealing with *culture specific elements* would mean focusing mainly upon problems related to the inter-linguistic and inter-cultural transfer of those linguistic items that manage to preserve the local atmosphere and something that exploits the specificity of every nation. We are regarding to that special category of untranslatable terms, real 'mill stones' for the translators, as they bear geographical, historical, socio-cultural experience. These *culture specific elements* "refer to the statements carrying cultural information, cultural units, culturally marked words"[11].

We have started this article with the conviction that language is in a permanent self-imposed evolution due to the fact that people need to align to what is perceived as current wording; by this, we mean that the evolution of humanity, of technology, of the socially-framed acceptance of the life of a people have their immediate or remote effect on its language. More than that, a people needs to bridge from the cultural point of view, and not only, to other peoples in the world, thus it tries to 'adjust' its language to them.

Therefore, this debate supports the idea of the necessity of permanent quest and discovery of what is specific and proper to a certain language, implicitly to a certain people. This prerogative is to be achieved by means of continuous re-inventions at the psycho-socio human level, on the one side and linguistic-cultural level on the other side.

The idea somehow imposes a short overview upon the dichotomy regarding the two features: that of traductibility and of intraductibility of the literary text. At least three levels of intraductibility have been established: one regarding the lexical aspect, (see the naming of the colours in different languages or of their symbols), another regarding the lack of synonymic and semantic symmetry among languages (in the Eskimo language there are 30 terms referring to 'snow', in the languages used in Argentina we may find 200 word referring to the 'horse skin' etc.) and the third one regards the special category of the terms considered impossible to translate, i.e. the culture specific elements, (terms like 'dor', 'tainã', 'spaţiu mioritic', 'mămăligă' in Romanian language or 'understatement', 'gentelman' in English language)[12]. Or, let us take the term 'bre' rendered as *man* or the collocation 'Mare minune!' dealt with in translation as 'Enough to make a cat speak!', both instances to be found in Ion Creangă's tale *Inul şi cămeşa.*

Nevertheless, since we agreed upon the necessity of translation, these terms need to be rendered and adapted to the target language. They are the so-called 'culture specific

[11] A. Martinet, cited by Georgiana Lungu Badea, *Teoria culturemelor, teoria traducerii*, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2004, p. 27.
[12]apud Rodica Dimitriu, *Theories and practices of translation*, Colecţia Cursus, Institutul European, Iaşi, 2002, p. 19

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elements' (CSEs) that are considered to be "statements carrying cultural information, cultural units, 'culturally marked items'[13], 'prestigious hints' (idem), next to cultisms, yet without identifying themselves with them, nor to the etymological doublets, or to the neologisms".

G. L Badea understands by CSE "that minimal unit carrying cultural information, unit that does not decompose in order to decode the meaning and perform the translation, since that kind of an operation would tamper with the correct understanding of the meaning by the receiver (be it reader, translator etc) and would, therefore, lead to the alteration of the authorial intent." Let us not loos sight of the definition offered by the DEX[14] "Culturem (CSE: Culture Specific Element) n. = the smallest unit of a cultural phenomenon, common element to certain cultural forms, structures, types. (...)"

It was highly necessary to clarify such a term, since a John Locke observed the linguistic and cultural barriers that impose that transfer resistance, that inertia in the translation process, while Wilhelm von Humboldt considered that languages were a "fascinating combination of universal linguistic and cultural elements with specific linguistic and cultural elements (...) that genius/spirit of the language of a people that cannot be transferred in a different language without suffering alterations in the process." [15]

CSEs that stand a solid resistance to transfer, meaning that they imply difficulties in rendering their meaning while transferring from one language into another. That needs to be clearly explained by the translator during his process of translating for the less unadvised public: thus, the CSEs will be approached from the semantic perspective in the detriment of the linguistic perspective.

It must be clear, by now, that by the efforts in translating (here we understand also the process of equation, adaptation, re-invention, rendering etc.) the CSEs in a different language, there is, on the one hand, always a certain amount of loss implied as well as, on the other hand, a certain amount of gain.

It goes without saying that one should not lose sight of the factors that contribute to the performing of a translation: the external factors (the socio-cultural, historical frame, information on the author - bio-bibliography, authorial intent etc., spatial-temporal coordinates of the source and target text, the receiver of the translation etc.) all accompanied by the intra-textual, internal factors (subject, content, composition, lexic, surface and deep structures of the phrase, style etc.)

Regardless the difficulties implied, translation of such precious linguistic events needs to be perceived as a means to enrich the vocabulary of a language. In the process of translation we activate areas of universal as well as national cultural identities. Each language is characterised by a proper linguistic and cultural spirit, therefore, indeed very difficult, if possible at all in the first place, to translate. Any language carries such specific terms, terms that contain information regarding the national identity, terms that cannot be entirely rendered into any different language.

Yet, as long as we have already established the necessity of the process of translation, these terms still need to be adapted to the target language. Once again, we have to embrace the idea according to which the translation has the capacity to access and decode linguistic conventions otherwise unique, specific to a certain people, proper to a certain culture.

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