Languages in Contest

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Rezumat

Pe lângă faptul de a face posibilă comunicarea imediată – un nivel la care limbile se găsesc în ipostaza lor vernaculară – traducerea poate implica şi transferul cultural, domeniu care implică ipostaza referenţială a limbilor în contact. Atunci când îndeplineşte această a doua funcţie, traducerea devine o operaţie de „reteritorializare”, de recentrare a identităţilor, în care o limbă sursă şi o limbă țintă îşi dispută statutul referenţial.

Introduction

Some translation theorists (A. Berman, 1984; A. Brisset, 1990) suggest that languages in translation may turn into languages in contest. Such theorists argue that translation, as a dual act of communication which presupposes the existence of two distinct codes, the source language and the target language, reflects the relation between these two codes, depending on their respective linguistic and cultural identities.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate a particular instance of linguistic contest, i.e. English versus Romanian, based on a sample of today’s translations in Romanian, with a view to assessing the ethnocentric behaviour of the two languages in translation.

Vernacular language versus referential language

When discussing the character of a language, i.e. its linguistic and cultural identity, four types of language subcodes as identified by Henry Gobard (1976: 34) should be taken into consideration:

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I. A *vernacular language*, which is local, spoken spontaneously, less appropriate for *communicating* than for *communing*, and the only language that can be considered to be the mother tongue (or native language).

II. A *vehicular language*, which is national or regional, learned out of necessity, to be used for communication in the city.

III. A *referential language*, which is tied to cultural, oral, and written traditions and ensures continuity in values by systematic reference to classic works of the past.

IV. A *mythical language*, which functions as the ultimate resource, verbal magic, whose incomprehensibility is considered to be irrefutable proof of the sacred…” (Annie Brisset’s translation in Lawrence Venuti (ed), original emphasis).

Throughout history, as Annie Brisset points out, translation has basically been oriented to the mother tongue, the native language since its “goal is to supplant such foreign forms of expression, which are viewed as alienating, literally dispossessing (…) to replace the language of the other by a native language. Not surprisingly, the native language chosen is usually the vernacular, «the linguistic birthright, the indelible mark of belonging». Translation becomes an act of reclaiming, of recentering of the identity, a reterritorializing operation. It does not create a new language, but it elevates a dialect to the status of a national and cultural language.” (in Lawrence Venuti (ed), 2000: 345-6).

Two examples are given to illustrate this “elevation” from dialectal/vernacular language to national/referential language: the translation of the Bible by Luther, which largely contributed to the creation of the German language, and the replacement of Latin by French after the edict of Villers-Cotterêts, in the sixteenth century which brought about a translation movement meant to radically change the vernacular status French had at the time.

We can add one more example, that of the Romanian language replacing the Slavonic language of the church and administration in the three Romanian provinces (the present territory of Romania) as a result of a translation movement similar to that of France and Germany which started off at about the same time, i.e. the sixteenth century.

If this ethnocentric behaviour of languages in contest had, in the sixteenth century, led to the creation of referential/national languages and relevant cultures, two-three centuries later it turned national languages such as English, French, Spanish, Russian, into somewhat “supernational” or “imperialistic” languages which replaced local idioms spoken in colonized or occupied territories. Empires fell eventually apart, most countries got their freedom, emancipated themselves politically but they remained linguistically dominated since their referential languages, the carriers of cultural values are still the “imperialistic” languages.
Today American English as the language of the most influential power in the world has consistently assumed the leading part in the contest of languages. The New World “invented” the consumer society, the hot dog, the spot advertisement, the blue jeans, the musical, the jazz, etc. and the Old World imported the “inventions” and adopted their American names. Contemporary European languages contain, therefore, a considerable amount of American borrowings. The Romanian language makes no exception. It adopted English words such as, e.g. hamburger, stress, management, fan, week-end, business, show, tabloid, rating, top, thriller, design, etc (partially adapted them to the Romanian pronunciation and grammar system) or borrowed only “meanings” and attached them to Romanian words. This type of borrowing, called semantic calque/loan translation is generally associated with words having similar forms in the two languages. Thus the Romanian verb a realiza enriched its semantic content with the meaning of the English verb to realize, i.e. ‘to become aware of or accept sth as a fact; to begin to understand sth’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2000). Likewise the Romanian adjective formal added to its original meaning that of the English adjective formal, i.e. ‘very correct and suitable for official or important occasions’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2000). The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române, 1996) includes the meanings acquired by the two words mentioned above which shows that they have been generally accepted by the Romanian speakers and assimilated into the Romanian idiom. This also points to a not very recent time of borrowing. Very recent borrowings - made in the last decade as a result of the Romanian society’s “re-opening” to the Western World – of either English words or English meanings are not acknowledged by dictionaries of the Romanian language.

Thus words like: rating, thriller, fashion, etc. or the English meanings of the Romanian words curricular (in the collocation reformă curriculară i.e. reform of curriculum) or a aplica (in the collocation a aplica pentru un post/job, a calque of the English apply for a job) are not included in dictionaries. Although not accepted yet by linguists such borrowings are very largely used particularly in the media, which is, by nature, the most cosmopolitan part of any national culture.

Languages at risk

Language purists have always rejected borrowings. They have worried about their capacity to jeopardize the national character of the adoptive language. The history of languages proves that this has never happened however.
After two hundred years of exposure to the Norman French (subsequent to the Norman Conquest in 1066 A.D.) - accounting for the fact that more than half of the words to be found in a dictionary of English are of Romanic origin – the English language remained Germanic. Likewise, after an even longer exposure to the Slavonic language, Romanian preserved its Romanic character.

Although a source of frustration for the common speaker until they are fully assimilated in his/her language, borrowings cannot affect the referential character of a language since they do not replace the basic word stock of a language and do not change its lexical and grammatical structures.

It’s not the borrowings but the source language oriented translations which can actually put the languages at the risk of losing their structural identities or formae mentis. The Romanian language of an English oriented translation is an alienated language, a mixture of English lexical and grammatical patterns and Romanian words.

A sample of such language is given in the table below. It includes an original American text, its Romanian published translation, and our (unpublished) translation which is meant to highlight deviation from lexical and grammatical meaning and inadequacy of register. The original text is taken from Arend Lijphart, Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries, Yale University, 1999 and the published translation Arend Lijphart, Modele ale democraţiei. Forme de guvernare şi funcţionare în treizeci şi şase de țări, Polirom, 2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL TEXT</th>
<th>PUBLISHED TRANSLATION</th>
<th>OUR TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table of Contents</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cuprins</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cuprins</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>Prefaţă</td>
<td>Prefaţă</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>1 Introducere</td>
<td>1 Introducere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Westminster Model of Democracy</td>
<td>2 Modelul Westminster al democraţiei</td>
<td>2 Democraţia de tip Westminster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The Consensus Model of Democracy</td>
<td>3 Modelul consensualist al democraţiei</td>
<td>3 Democraţia de tip consensual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Thirty-Six Democracies</td>
<td>4 Treizeci şi şase de democraţii</td>
<td>4 Treizeci şi şase de democraţii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Party Systems: Two-Party and Multiparty Patterns</td>
<td>5 Sisteme de parte</td>
<td>5 Sisteme politice: bipartidism şi pluripartidism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Cabinets: Concentration Versus Sharing of Executive Power</td>
<td>6 Cabinele. Concentrarea puterii contra distribuţiei puterii executive</td>
<td>6 Modele de guvernare. Guverne monocolore versus coaliţii guvernamentale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Executive-Legislative Relations: Patterns of Dominance and Balance of Power</td>
<td>7 Relaţii executiv-legislativ. Modele ale dominiunăiei şi ale echilibrului puterii</td>
<td>7 Relaţia dintre executiv şi legislativ: între dominaţie şi echilibru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Electoral Systems: Majority and Plurality Methods</td>
<td>8 Sisteme electorale, Metodele majoritară şi pluralitară contra repre-</td>
<td>8 Sisteme electorale: majo- ritarism sau reprezentare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overwhelmed by English, the Romanian of this translation seems to have lost its “intelligence”, its own means of expression and become an utterly vernacular idiom. Romanian readers of this translation having no knowledge of English, will have the very frustrating experience of meaning which cannot be grasped, meaning which keeps evading apparently familiar, Romanian ‘sounding’ words.
Conclusion

One may conclude that while translation is a real instance of linguistic contest, an instance which forces languages to face the ‘trial of the foreigner’ (l’épreuve de l’étranger as A. Berman puts it), the degree to which the translating language admits the foreign text into own structures is a matter of linguistic character or forma mentis but it is also a matter of extralinguistic circumstances. And it’s generally the extralinguistic factors which actually jeopardize the referential status of the translating language.

Bibliography