# Translating Beyond the Linguistic Signs – an Attempt to Communicate Cultural-Situational Meaning Cross-Linguistically

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**Résumé :** Le présent travail se propose d'analyser la mesure dans laquelle les différences culturelles exercent une influence sur la communication interlinguistique à travers la traduction. Plus exactement, nous voulons souligner les difficultés soulevées par les modalités propres dans lesquelles chaque langue organise son discours, en fonction du contexte situationnel, et plus précisément en fonction du domaine de l'activité sociale qui mène à l'apparition du texte (field), de la chaîne de communication – écrite ou parlée – (mode) et des relations entre les protagonistes de la communication (tenor). Le travail se propose aussi de signaler la possibilité d'introduire la traduction comme activité communicative et comme une compétence indépendante dans l'enseignement de l'anglais aux classes de lycée. Dans ce sens, nous essayons d'attirer l'attention sur la façon dont les considérations d'ordre théorique mentionnées ci-dessus, résultat de l'influence des orientations de type pragmatique sur la Traductologie, peuvent être appliquées aux classes d'anglais dans l'enseignement au lycée, en tenant compte du niveau d'âge et de l'instruction des élèves. **Mots-clés :** différences culturelles, communication interlinguistique, traduction

In an age when English is a *lingua franca*, intercultural communication seems to be considerably eased, since more and more people can speak this language and use it in verbal interaction and negotiation. Things are not always so simple, because the existence of one or several widely circulated languages does not automatically ensure viable communication. Whether we regard it as a positive or a negative aspect, globalisation is still far from being a fact, and cultural identity still makes its presence felt. Different identities mean different backgrounds, expectations, different ways of picturing reality and the world, and of framing this reality, according to the language we were born in.

When cross-cultural communication by means of translation is concerned, things are equally complicated. The mediation which implies transfer of content from one language into another is not so straightforward, since the ways each language organises meaning in discourse differ, especially if we conceive meaning beyond the mere sum of word denotations. Each language has specific ways of discourse organisation, through which more subtle things, such as attitudes, role relationships, status, and the social situation requiring its production are conveyed.

## 1. Register: field, tenor, mode

Texts are appropriate in a certain culture because they are constructed according to certain conventions, depending on the context in which they appear. If we refer to the situational context, register is considered to be the one that negotiates between language and situation, being defined as the name given to language according to use (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1964: 83). The three dimensions of register, which are interdependent (a given level of formality –tenor- influences and is influenced by a particular level of technicality – field- in an appropriate channel of communication -mode) need a careful analysis in view of translation.

**1.1**. In simple words, the **field** of a text tells which domain of experience a text is about (family life, religious observance, law enforcement, etc). It has been defined as referring "to the total event in which the text is functioning, together with the purpositive activity of the speaker or writer, thus including the *subject matter as one element in it*" (Trosborg, 2002:11, my emphasis), and not being a synonym for the term 'subject matter'. Field can also be defined in terms of 'institutional focus' or 'social activity type' (Eggins, 1994:103) and it can be viewed on a technical (specialised) - commonsense (everyday) continuum. Each of the ends of the continuum is characterised in terms of lexical and grammatical differences (technical terms vs. every day terms, words only insiders

understand vs. words we all understand, acronyms vs. full names, abbreviated syntax vs. standard syntax, etc). The fact that the field is so clearly delimited by linguistic means has important consequences for translation: field equivalence cannot possibly be ignored, if the target text (TT) is to be functionally equivalent with the source text (ST) and it is not automatically achieved through literal translation. For this purpose, knowledge of the requirements for appropriateness in each culture, with regard to lexico-grammatical structures specific to a certain degree of technicality is necessary. Hatim and Mason, speak about possible problems that may arise when translating from a source language (SL) with a rich scientific and technical culture (such as English), into one that has poorer resources. Translators have to face the challenge of "forging new expression in these fields - an activity which transcends issues of bilingual terminologies and broaches wider questions of identity, ideology etc" (1990: 48).

**1.2 Mode** is characterised by Halliday (1993: 25) as the channel of wavelength selected, which includes the medium (spoken or written), explained as a functional variable. Taking over Eggins's model again (1994: 90-2), we may envisage mode as characterised by means of two simultaneous continua, both referring to distance in the relation between language and situation:

a) The spatial/interpersonal distance, whose variables are the visual and aural contact, and the kind of feedback possible, ranges from 'casual conversation' to 'novel' as the extreme modes of discourse, having the telephone conversation, (maybe the chat on the messenger) the email, the fax, and the radio in between.

b) Experiential distance ranges situations of difference between language and the social process for which it is necessary. At one pole there are examples such as playing a game of bridge, in which language accompanies the social process (language as action), at the other there is (non-)fiction literature, in which case language constitutes the social process itself (seen as reflection). In between there are modes such as calling a match (commentating) and the report in the newspaper (recounting experience).

From the combination of these two dimensions, the contrast between the spoken and the written media appears more clearly. The two modes can be characterised contrastively, by linguistic means such as spontaneity phenomena (false starters, interruptions, overlap, incomplete sentences) versus final draft (i.e. polishing –the indications of earlier drafts are removed), everyday lexis (including dialect and slang) versus 'prestige' lexis, non-standard versus standard grammar, grammatical complexity versus grammatical simplicity etc. The more formal written mode is further individualised (Eggins, 1994: 95-7) by frequent nominalization as a means of rhetorical organisation and high lexical density. Both spoken and written mode can be subdivided.

The spoken mode can be sub-classified into:

a) 'speaking spontaneously' (conversing and monologuing) and

b) 'speaking non-spontaneously' (the speaking of what is written and reciting);

The written one is sub-classified into:

a) 'written to be spoken as if not written' (lectures and some sermons),

b) 'written to be spoken', and

c) 'written not necessarily to be spoken' (to be read) (Hatim & Mason, 1990:

49).

The lexical, (phonological) and grammatical markers are most of the time culturespecific and unfortunately are not always seriously taken into consideration in the translation process. The issue of an awareness of the linguistic means of expression specific to each sub-mode in both languages arises here, too, to make the TT both appropriate in the target culture (TC) and functionally equivalent with the ST. If, according to the translation brief, the TT will have a (slightly) different function in the TC, the appropriate mode has to be defined.

**1.3** The third, and, in my opinion the most problematic variable (at least when it comes to the English-Romanian pair), is the **tenor of discourse**, sometimes also called 'style' of discourse, or 'status' or 'attitude'. It refers to "the type of role interactions, the set of relevant social relations, permanent and temporary among the participants involved" (Trosborg, 2002: 11). Some theorists (Trosborg, id.) consider that the crucial factors that influence tenor, leading to symmetrical (two equal parties) or asymmetrical relations (one party has superior status: specialist - layman, child – teacher, employer – employee etc.), are *status, age* and *knowledge*. Others (such as Eggins, 1994: 99-103) see *power, contact,* and *affective involvement* as the variables that account for formality, politeness and reciprocity. Mcgregor (in Hatim and Munday, 2009:190) distinguishes between personal tenor, when the relationship the user of language has with his audience is personal and functional tenor, when this relationship is functional (concerned with what the user is trying to do with language to his audience- teaching persuading, amusing, disciplining, exhorting, etc).

Personal tenor contains different degrees of formality which can be distinguished as 'casual', 'intimate' and 'deferential' tenors (Halliday, 1964: 93) or, in even more detail, in Joos' distinction between frozen, formal, consultative, casual, intimate levels (in Trosborg, 2002: 22-3).

a) The *frozen* style, marked by social distance between sender and receiver, is impersonal (lexicon known only by experts; e.g.: in contracts). For example, the farewell formula "Good day, Sir!" in the spoken mode is specific to the frozen style.

b) The *formal* text is also marked for social distance. The syntax is impersonal (high frequency of complex sentence structures and noun phrases, absence of contractions, absence of qualifying modal verbs). For example, "Good bye!" as a farewell formula is specific to the spoken mode).

c) The *consultative* text is written in neutral 'normal' style. Receiver participation may be elicited. The lexicon may contain everyday conversational expressions; direct speech may be present. The utterance "So long!" is appropriate for the consultative style in the spoken mode.

d) The *casual* style is marked by various degrees of implicitness because of a higher degree of intimacy between sender and receiver. It is characterised by simple sentence and noun phrase structure, by ellipsis, contraction and slang and interruptions are a frequent phenomenon. "Bye-bye!" is a suitable farewell formula if the casual tenor is to be used.

e) The *intimate* style is used between people who are very close and have a maximum of shared background information; intonation is more important than wording or grammar, private vocabulary is also characteristic (e.g. Ta-ta!). (Trosborg, 2002: 22-3, examples taken from Dimitriu, 2002:82).

Tenor illustrates even better the fact that languages have specific ways of seeing and partitioning reality. In my opinion, it is the most problematic variable when translation is concerned. Difficulties in translating at tenor level arise because:

a) Different cultures have different perspectives on *appropriacy* with regard to formality. In this respect, Hatim and Munday (2009:190) give the example of the different ways Americans and Japanese express deference in family relationships (e.g. in the fatherson relationship). This applies to a certain degree to the Romanian vs. American customs and cultural conventions, especially if we refer to the past (a less 'respectful' way of addressing one's parents is seen as normal by the new generation, while two centuries ago this would have not been accepted).

b) There are culture-bound linguistic means of *expressing* formality (English has a much richer scale of degrees of formality than Romanian for instance).

The overlap between field, tenor and mode is proved again by the fact that formality is expressed also as a function of mode: see the difference between 'most obliged' or 'I'm extremely thankful' (formal, mainly *spoken*) and 'Please convey our thanks to...' or 'Finally, I should like to express my gratitude to...' (formal, mainly *written*) or 'how very kind' (casual, mainly *spoken*) and 'it was most kind of you to...' (casual, mainly *written*). It is obvious from these examples that such ways of expression vary also function of the text generating activity (for some fields of activity the written mode and a certain level of formality are appropriate – e.g. for contracts- for others, only the spoken one – e.g. for games- while for others, both the spoken and the written modes are appropriate, depending on the circumstance- e.g. in the case of advertisements).

**1.4** As previously mentioned, the English-Romanian pair does not make an exception with regard to the lack of correlation between languages at the level of register. Even if, on the whole, the same fields of activity are present in both languages (although in Romanian some of them do not benefit from the same tradition and refinement of linguistic means) and that they are expressed in roughly the same modes, the interpersonal or interactional dimension is clearly seen and materialised in different manners by the two languages. Skilful translators have to compensate for this lack of parity by various techniques. For instance for the Romanian "Îi zise: 'Săru' mânuşițele, Coniță!' și îi sărută mâna respectuos" possible ways of translating (since both the greeting formula and the gesture are culture-bound and they would be meaningless if translated literally) would be "He bent respectfully and said: 'Good morning/afternoon/evening, M'am!' ". In such cases we are also dealing with some pragmatic issues such as (extralinguistic) presupposition triggers, i.e. words/ phrases that refer to culturally specific realities and with social dialect.

## 2. Teaching register as a basic translation skill to high school students

Although the findings of discourse analysis and of other pragmatic approaches to Translation Studies are mostly applicable to translator education and training at university level, a number of insights coming from this discipline could be profitably used with (senior) high-school students, in an attempt to help them develop their basic translation skills. Raising their awareness to register-related aspects involved in translating a text, especially from English into Romanian [1], by combining theoretical principles (briefly presented and in a manner suitable to their age and level of knowledge) with many translation examples are didactic approaches with high potential for positive long term outcomes. Beyond the acquisition of strictly linguistic abilities, students will benefit from the translation experience in a much more complex manner: such activities could enrich their background with elements specific to the Anglo-Saxon culture (especially linguistic and cultural conventions, but not only), also strengthening the knowledge they have about their own language and culture, with its specific patterns and conventions; moreover, this experience could increase their self-confidence as language users, and, why not, pave their way for a future translation career.

**2.1** Although many of the theoretical considerations may be a little too abstract for their level, students are familiar with such terms as slang, every day vs. technical language, maybe even with the formal / informal distinction. Drawing on these facts, we may attempt, for instance, to raise their awareness to the way the field of (linguistic) activity and the mode of expression influence the lexico-grammatical choices one has to make in view of efficient communication, or to sensitise them to the difficulties that arise because of the lack of correspondence between languages when formality is concerned.

**2.1.1** For this purpose, short examples of texts from various social activity areas, either mirrored by model translations, or contrasted with texts from the same field in the other language may be a stimulus for raising their interest in cultural diversity. Supplying a wide range of English texts belonging to various fields may also be helpful in order to illustrate the way in which different fields - and implicitly different genres- require different framings and linguistic means of expression.

2.1.2 The aims of raising students' awareness of cultural differences and of developing basic translations skills should be attained by observing the principles of communicative and post-communicative approaches to ELT. The translation activities should be integrated in a carefully devised context. In this respect, the macro-level has to be taken into account, as it involves integrating translation in the larger context of classroom activities which aim at developing Ss' language, culture, and communication skills; the micro-level is equally important, dealing with the existence of a suitable environment for the translation; as such, it needs to be preceded by pre-translation activities (which should give students some orientation to the aims of the activity) and followed by post-translation activities (meant to encourage students to reflect upon the choices they made, and maybe to infer some general principles from their experiences). The students need to be given a *purpose* for their activity, in order to increase their motivation and interest and focus their attention on relevant aspects. Simulation can sometimes be used in order to increase motivation and to give pupils a sense of purpose. Work can be organized in pairs or groups for certain stages; learner autonomy can be encouraged by means of tasks that have to be accomplished without teacher supervision, feedback being expected only much later

**2.2.** High school students may be, for instance, encouraged to notice particularities of text-types belonging to various fields of activity, as well as their functions: a cooking recipe, an instruction sheet and a shop-assistant - customer dialogue for buying and selling stamps, a legislative text concerning the alimony and a letter of advertisement announcing price reductions are possible examples of texts that can be exploited in various ways.

Examples 1-5:

1) Line a gas boiler with foil to protect it from aubergine juice. Turn flame to medium-low. Place aubergine directly over the flame and let it get charred o one side. Keep turning the aubergine until the entire skin looks burnt and the vegetable turns limp and soft. Peel away the charred skin under cold, running water. Chop the aubergine pulp.

2) operate this device only on 3 V DC with 2 R6 batteries (size AA batteries). For AC operation use the AC-E311/E314 power Adaptor. Do not use any other type.

For car battery operation, use the car battery cord recommended. Do not use any other type.

3) S1: yes, please.

S2: Can I have these two like that?

S1: Yes.

S1: One's forty-five.

S1: One's twenty-five.

S1: How many would you like?

S2: Four, please.

S1: Two of which?

S2: What have you got?

S1: Uh...There's two different designs of the... (shows cover)

S2: I'll take two of each

S1: uhum

S1: right... that's a dollar seventy thank you

S1 here we are

S2 thank you

S1: dollar seventy that's four and one's five

S1: thank you very much

S2 thank you

S1 they'll be right I'll fix those up in a moment

S2 okay

4) Courts allocate alimony with the intention of permitting a spouse to maintain the standard of living to which the spouse has become accustomed. Factors affecting whether the court awards alimony include the marriage's length, the length of separation before divorce, the parties' ages, the parties' respective incomes, the parties' future financial prospects, the health of the parties, and the parties' respective faults in causing the marriage's demise.

If a couple had children together while married, a court may require one spouse to pay child support to the spouse with custody, but one should note that alimony and *child support* differ.

5) Dear Ms. Cohen, This is my favourite kind of letter. How many letters have I had to write over the years advising you of a price increase? Why, you ask, am I so happy? Read on. This is to advise you that, for a limited period of time, we are reducing prices on certain items in our catalogue. Take a moment to review the enclosed catalogue. I have circled in red ink the items that are temporarily reduced. What an opportunity! Please take advantage of these prices. If you wish to order large quantities, or stagger shipments, give me a call and we will try to work out mutually acceptable terms and conditions. In any event, get your order in, as these prices are only in effect until 15<sup>th</sup> of February. I do enjoy writing this type of letter. Thank you in advance for your order.

The above texts can be analyzed individually or in parallel, first as instances of communication, in view of detecting textual conventions - such as means of cohesion, verb mood, etc - that can also be used by students in their own compositions in the TL. This could be one of the pre-translation activities; the translation proper can then be followed by some post-translation activities, which should concentrate, for instance, on drawing conclusions about the degree of formality of example **5** vs. example **4**, which belong to the written mode, both of them being *instruction* texts (cf. Trosborg, in Dimitriu, 2002: 51), the tenor being, however, a different one. Students may be asked to compare the two English texts, but also their Romanian versions with the original.

The task of "mirroring" the Romanian and English texts may also be used for example **6** (see below), which contains 2 versions of the same piece of news, one taken from a Romanian newspaper (*Jurnalul Național*) the other being the actual source a British site (*http://feeds.bignewsnetwork.com/?sid=627957*). Students are encouraged to see in which ways the Romanian translation differs from the English source (changing the arrangement of paragraphs, reordering, adding etc).Each paragraph is given a number in both texts, in order to make their search easier.

Example 6:

### Romanian : Un site britanic a scos la concurs postul de viitor premier al Marii Britanii

R1) Un site britanic de recrutare de personal a scos la concurs postul de viitor premier al Marii Britanii, una din condițiile specificate fiind ca potențialii candidați să aibă "un obraz suficient de gros pentru a ignora atacurile personale", informează site-ul BigNews.

R2) Mai mult de o sută de persoane au aplicat până în prezent la această poziție, deschisă pe un site de recrutare pentru funcții în sectorul public, intitulat JobsGoPublic.com.

Printre condițiile impuse candidaților se numără "un obraz gros, necesar pentru a ignora atacurile personale" sau "participarea săptămânală la întâlniri televizate, unde deciziile politice vor fi supuse dezbaterilor și, în aceeași măsură, ridiculizate".

R3) "Până acum avem câteva aplicații de excepție din partea unor candidați calificați. Unul dintre aplicanți și-a descris responsabilitățile exercitate în prezent ca «șanțurile de apărare din jurul castelelor și achiziția de case pentru rațe». Avem printre candidați chiar și foști șefi de stat care și-au depus CV-ul", a declarat Haylee Corfield, Marketing Manager la JobsGoPublic.

R4) Candidatul selectat va fi găzduit "într-o casă mare, cu terasă, care are nevoie de redecorări complete", pentru care "cheltuielile vor putea fi deduse, iar chitanțele trebuie păstrate".

R5) Potrivit anunțului, jobul, deși solicitant, oferă un contract de angajare pe cinci ani. După terminarea mandatului, postul de premier asigură mai multe beneficii. Conform anunțului, cei care au ocupat în trecut această poziție, au ajuns în scurt timp la statutul de milionar.

English: Job advertisement for Britain's next PM

E1) A job advertisement has been placed at a recruitment website seeking applications for the next prime minister of Britain and stating that candidates have to be 'thick skinned enough to ignore personal attacks'.

E2) Over 100 people have applied for it after the job was advertised on JobsGoPublic.com, which is a recruitment site for public sector jobs, *The Telegraph* reported Tuesday.

E3) Not only are the candidates required to be 'thick skinned enough to ignore personal attacks', they also have to 'attend weekly televised meetings at which all policy decisions will be publicly reviewed/ridiculed'.

E4) 'We've got some brilliant applications from some highly qualified candidates. One applicant described their current responsibilities as 'castle moat and duck house procurement'. We've even had former heads of state put down as referees,' Haylee Corfield, marketing manager at JobsGoPublic, was quoted as saying.

E5) The selected candidate will get an accommodation in the form of a 'large, furnished terraced house in need of complete redecoration', for which expenses can be claimed 'on a not-for-profit basis, but receipts may have to be produced'.

E6) The job may be demanding but it offers 'a five year, fixed term contract 24/7/365, or more as required'.

E7) The benefits after demitting office: 'The role provides a great entry point and networking opportunity into the world of business, finance and consultancy, allowing the successful candidate the prospect of furthering their considerable earning power at the termination of their position. Previous incumbents have attained millionaire status in a very short period of time'.

As an example of simulation, students may be encouraged to imagine that their father has an electric device and the instructions manual has no translation for one chapter, so he needs help with the translation (for e.g. **2**, see p. 5). After a number of activities in which the teacher has been a resource and a monitor and students have worked in the classroom, individually or in pairs/groups, they may receive tasks which encourage learner autonomy (e.g. translation of the next sequence from a previously studied text, project works such as making their own "cooking book" which should contain recipes taken from the internet and translated into Romanian). Through such tasks pupils should acquire, among other things, dictionary skills, but also cooperation skills –as in the example with the cooking book. The range of possibilities is quite vast, once we open our minds towards the prospect of welcoming translation as a necessary activity and even as a (rough) skill, perceiving it as a communicative activity with all the effects that result from this perspective.

## Conclusion

In an age of unparalleled dynamism and intense trans-linguistic contacts, crosscultural mediation by means of translation - and not only - needs to take into account the fact that cultural diversity is still a reality. An awareness of what differentiates us from others, as far as discourse norms are concerned, is necessary so as to overcome the difficulties raised by the lack of correspondence between languages at register level. Knowledge of cultural and linguistic norms of both S and T cultures (i.e. of what is appropriate in a specific occasion) is also necessary. The attempt to sensitize (advanced) high-school students to some of these considerations, mostly by means of practical activities of translation as a communicative activity, should bring them at least the advantage of a more comprehensible view upon the phenomenon of cross-cultural diversity

## Notes

[1] One of the undisputed, though (for practical reasons) rarely observed methodological principles in translator training is that directionality in translation should be into the mother tongue.

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