

## Cultural Issues in Translation

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**Abstract.** Translation is recognised as an act of culture-specific communication. A translator is the ‘first reader’ of the other culture as is shown in the foreign language text and, consequently, has to present the other in a primary process. For him learning to translate means ‘learning to read’, i.e. to produce meanings which are acceptable for the cultural community the reader belongs to. Each translated text for a target public that has no access to the original, is the source for a different and new way of reading, which implies a major responsibility for the translator.

As it has been observed, such interaction between two or more cultures in the process of translation results in a creation of a ‘hybrid’ text, which appears in the target culture by adopting some of the features of the text in the source culture. As a matter of fact, a hybrid text can be described as a product of a compromise between two or more cultures.

The paper will concentrate on the kinds of the interaction and intercultural activity, which refer to ‘translating between cultures’. The basis for discussion will be literary texts by Vladimir Nabokov as well as Helen Fielding and lyrics of songs presented in different language versions of the musical *Metro*.

### Introduction

The **objective** of this paper is to discuss the **problem** of cultural differences and cultural aspects in a literary text as well as the ways of their translation by means of some specific strategies. I intend to compare selected English and Polish materials with their Russian, Polish and English equivalents in order to delineate three different approaches to the art of translation. The source texts, which I have singled out for the purpose of the analysis, come from *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by Helen Fielding and *Metro* by Agata Miklaszewska and Maryna Miklaszewska (the authors of libretto).

As we shall see, it is extremely difficult to find a text in which all cultural issues would be translated by means of the same strategy. However, it would be worth observing how some translators resolve the problems that arise when the elements of one culture should be transposed to the environment of another.

Primarily, I wish to present the theoretical background concerned with cultural elements and the ways of their translation. I depict the issues from the standpoint of the theory of translation and linguistics. Further on, I will briefly analyse the selected examples of cultural aspects and their equivalents in translated texts, concentrating on the strategies of their translation and on the role which they play in conveying information referred to the presented events and characters.

### Translation as a Culture-specific Communication

The concept of culture is fundamental to any approach to translation. If translation is defined as source text induced

text production, translation into a foreign language will always be an instance of intercultural communication.

Bearing in mind that culture plays the undeniable role in the process of translation, theorists propose new definitions of this term, revising the previous opinions. The most appropriate and relevant to the cultural approach to translation seems to be the definition worked out by Olgierd Wojtasiewicz, a Polish linguist and the author of the first Polish monograph concerned with the theory of translation. According to Wojtasiewicz, ‘the mechanism of translating a text *a* formulated in the language *A* into the language *B* means formulating the text *b* in the language *B* so that the reader would have the same or similar associations as the reader of the text *a*’ (Wojtasiewicz, 1992:26).

Hence, the translator will have to bridge the gap, small or large, between two cultures. Culture is to be understood not only in the narrower sense of man’s advanced intellectual development as reflected in the arts, but also in the broader anthropological sense of all socially conditioned aspects of human life, as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception. Culture has thus to do with common factual knowledge, usually including political institutions, education, history and current affairs as well as religion and customs.

Since translation is recognised as an act of culture-specific communication, a translator is the ‘first reader’ of the other culture as is shown in the foreign language text and he is expected to present the other in a primary process. It should be also mentioned that for the translator learning to translate means ‘learning to read’, i.e. to produce meanings which are acceptable for the cultural community the reader belongs to (cf. Wolf, 1997:128). Each translated text for a target public that has no access to the original, is the source

for a different and new way of reading. All this implies a major responsibility for the translator.

The main problem for the translator is how to comply with cultural issues, i.e. to decide which issues take priority: the cultural aspects of the source language community, the cultural aspects of the target language community, or perhaps a combination of the two, a compromise between two or more cultures? The choice of cultural strategy may result in source-culture bound translation (the translation stays within the source language culture – so called foreignisation), target-culture bound translation (the translation stays within the target language culture – so called domestication) or in a ‘hybrid’, where the translation is a product of a compromise between two or more cultures.

The concept of a hybrid text as a feature of contemporary intercultural communication that could contribute to translation studies has been described by Christina Schäffner and Beverly Adab in their article *Translation as intercultural communication – Contact as conflict* (1997). The authors presented four independent opinions of the following panellists: Anna Trosborg, Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit, Candace Séguinot and Ieva Zauberga, who participated in a discussion on some selected questions connected with the problem of hybrid texts.

A hybrid text has been provisionally defined as follows:

‘A hybrid text is a text that results from a translation process. It shows features that somehow seem ‘out of place’/‘strange’/‘unusual’ for the receiving culture, i.e. the target culture. These features, however, are not the result of a lack of translational competence or examples of ‘translationese’, but they are evidence of conscious and deliberate decisions by the translator. Although the text is not yet fully established in the target culture (because it does not conform to established norms and conventions), a hybrid text is accepted in its target culture because it fulfils its intended purpose in the communicative situation (at least for a certain time)’ (1997:325).

Even though the concept of hybrid texts applies mainly to political texts or legal documents, some of its aspects refer also to the majority of literary texts which come to existence as a compromise between various cultures and ‘are arrived at as an outcome of negotiations between different languages and cultures and may involve features which are contradictory to target language and target culture norms’ (330). As an example it would be worth considering one of Nabokov’s techniques of translation.

### ‘Hybridisation’ in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

In his own Russian translation of *Lolita* Vladimir Nabokov does not transpose the setting from the United States to the Soviet Union, as he does in his early translation of *Alice in Wonderland*. He does not change names, places or events. What he transposes, however, are historical and literary allusions which are quite frequently replaced by references from another literature, as it can be proved by the following example:

*I have not much at the bank right now but I propose to borrow - you now, as the Bard said, with that cold in his head, to borrow and to borrow and to borrow* (Nabokov, 1995:293).

*у меня сейчас маловато в банке, но ничего, буду жить долгами, как жил его отец по словам поэта* (Набоков, 1989:280),

where a quotation from *Evgeny Onegin* by Aleksander Pushkin is substituted for a quotation from *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. Such a solution makes it possible for the reader to share the cultural knowledge presupposed by the author.

A similar method can be observed in the translation of wordplay. Although in some cases Nabokov does resort to explanation and sometimes even omits the pun altogether, he prefers to substitute an equivalent related to Russian language or Russian culture. These equivalents are often extremely ingenious and just as effective as the original. Here are a few typical examples:

1. *one hardly had to be a Coleridgian to appreciate the trite poke of: „A. Person, Porlock, England”* (Nabokov, 1995:250).

П.О.Темкин, Одесса, Техас (Набоков, 1989:285).

The quotation from English version of *Lolita* is a clear literary allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his *Kubla Khan* where appears ‘a person of Porlock’, whereas in the translation Nabokov draws the reader’s attention to the history of the Soviet cinematography and the film directed by Sergiej Eisenstein.

2. *An ordinary encyclopedia informed me who the peculiar looking „Phineas Quimby, Lebanon, NH” was* (Nabokov, 1995:250).

The word ‘Quimby’ is not only an allusion to the name of the American hypnotist and pioneer in the field of psychotherapy, but also a contaminated form of the words ‘Quilty’ i ‘quim’ [a slang offensive name of woman’s sexual organs]. In the Russian version Nabokov introduced to the text equally intriguing information:

*Из невинных Бермудских Островов он сделал остроу - каламбур, который пристойность не разрешает мне привести.* (Л 286)

which might be understood as ‘Бери мать с кия остроу вы(ижицу)’ (Paszek, Skwarek, 1992:82) and refers to the relationship between *Lolita* and Humbert, similarly to the English version.

Word play and sound-instrumentation are quite important for understanding the plot and the message of the novel; thus without transposition of these devices into the target language culture the readers would miss a significant element in comprehending the book.

### Foreignisation and Quasi-domestication of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

The terms ‘domestication’ and ‘foreignisation’ are extensively used in the works referred to translation studies. ‘Domestication’ in the broader sense means the domestic assimilation of a foreign text. A full explanation of its meaning is to be extracted from the following paragraph:

'Translation is often regarded with suspicion because it inevitably domesticates foreign texts, inscribing them with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies. This process of inscription operates at every stage in the production, circulation, and reception of the translation. It is initiated by the very choice of a foreign text to translate, always an exclusion of other foreign texts and literatures, which answers to particular domestic interests. It continues most forcefully in the development of a translation strategy that rewrites the foreign text in domestic dialects and discourses, always a choice of certain domestic values to the exclusion of others. And it is further complicated by the diverse forms in which the translation is published, reviewed, read, and taught, producing cultural and political effects that vary with different institutional contexts and social positions' (Venuti, 1998:67).

This concept of 'domestication' only to some degree applies to the translation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding, at least to the Russian one. The cases of domestication intersperses between the numerous examples of foreignisation. As a matter of fact, the strategy of 'domestication' has been used here in order to assimilate or change those elements which may have been too alien to the reader (because of some limitations concerning his knowledge). However, it would be worth observing two techniques of translation demonstrated in Polish and Russian versions of the *Diary*.

Moskvicheva and Naczynska, the authors of Russian and Polish translations respectively, undoubtedly are aware of the differences and enormously complex relations between the West and the East, which still exist in spite of the process of globalisation. In many cases they both supply additional explanations related to English places, institutions, holidays, etc. or they even omit some of them altogether. Sometimes, however, keeping in mind that Polish or Russian people may have limited knowledge about British culture and its representatives, they take certain steps to bring the novel closer to the reader and decide to change some names and replace them by the others – better known or more popular in the target language society. Let us compare three language versions of the following passage:

*Then we ended up lying side by side and not touching, like we were Morecambe and Wise or John Noakes and Valerie Singleton in the Blue Peter House* (Fielding, 2001:124).

*Potem leżeliśmy obok siebie, w ogóle się nie dotykając, jakbyśmy byli Morecambe'em i Wise'em albo Johnem Noakesem i Valerie Singleton w „Błękitnym Piotruśiu”.*

\*Morecambe i Wise - duet komików telewizyjnych.

\*\**Błękitny Piotruś* - cykliczny program telewizyjny dla dzieci. (Fielding, 2000:96)

*Наконец мы улеглись рядышком, не касаясь друг друга, словно Лорел и Харди на каникулах.*

\*Лорел и Харди - известные американские клоуны. (Филдинг, 2000:146)

It is not difficult to see that Moskvicheva, the Russian translator, replaces the names of the lesser known Morecambe, Wise, John Noakes, Valerie Singleton and the title of their programme *Blue Peter*, not familiar to the reader, by two names of commonly known and world-famous U.S. film comedians, Stan Laurel and Oliver

Hardy. The same passage in Polish version reveals a different translator's strategy. Naczynska adds some information related to Morecambe and Wise, and describes the sort of programme in which John Noakes and Valerie Singleton appear.

Here are two further examples of the method of translation presented above:

*'Oh, hello, Mark, I know of you, of course,' gushed Perpetua as if she were Prunella Scales in „Fawlty Towers” and he were the Duke of Edinburgh* (Fielding, 2001:101).

- *Och, Witaj, Mark. Oczywiście słyszałam o tobie - zagegala Perpetua, jakby była Prunella Scales z „Hotelu Zacisze”, a on księciem Edynburga* (Fielding, 2000:79).

- *О, здравствуйте, Марк. Я знаю о вас, конечно, - изрекла Перпетуя, как будто она была королевой-матерью, а он герцогом Эдинбургским* (Филдинг, 2000:120).

*Stereotypical notions of shelves, spinning wheels and sexual scrapheaps conspire to make you feel stupid, no matter how much time you spend thinking about Joanna Lumley and Susan Sarandon* (Fielding, 2001:20).

*Stereotypowe wyobrażenia półek, kołowrotek i seksualnych złomowisk sprawiają, że czujesz się jak idiotka, bez względu na to, ile czasu spędzasz, myśląc o Joannie Lumley i Susan Sarandon.*

\**Joanna Lumley (ur. 1946) - aktorka brytyjska* (Fielding, 2000:20).

*Стереотипные представления о старых девах, прялках и полной сексуальной непригодности наваливаются исподтишка и заставляют женщину чувствовать себя идиоткой, сколько бы времени она ни проводила о Голди Хоун и Сьюзен Сарандон* (Филдинг, 2000:29).

## Musical in Translation

The cases mentioned so far required choices that were limited to some passages or even structures or proper names. However, many texts when translated demand transposition entirely into the target language culture if they are to convey a certain message. As an example it would be worth considering two lyrics from the musical *Metro* (by Janusz Stokłosa - music, Agata and Maryna Miklaszewska's - libretto, and Janusz Józefowicz - director, choreography) and their translations into Russian.

*Metro* had its premiere in Poland in 1991. The first public performance in Russia took place in October 1999 in Moscow Operetta Theatre. The plot of *Metro* is based upon a purely romantic story combined with such serious problems as money and betrayal, the generation gap and cruel reality. Its message, addressed mainly to young people, is to present universal values that are worth preserving in a world of cruelty, hopelessness and sadness. This is also the reason why in every country where it was staged, *Metro* is adjusted to the local environment, portraying various problems and aspects of life of the place. For Poland it was the beginning of the post-communist era, while for Russia it was the step of Russian youth into the 21-st century, the ability to express yourself in the world of adults.

The difference between cultural background of Polish and Russian audience, taken into consideration in the process of translation, may be easily observed in a fragment of the lyrics of the first song introducing the musical:

Gdy zmęczy cię obcego miasta ulic szum  
Gdzie nie dla ciebie są towary na wystawach  
Nie możesz przebić się przez obojętny tłum  
Do metra zejdź! Tam całkiem inne rządzą prawa.  
Jestem na gigancie. Nawet nie wiecie, co to jest 'gigant'.  
Normalnie, uciekłam z domu. Tu mnie nie znajdują. Zobaczysz mnie  
dopiero w telewizji, na ekranie. Może wreszcie mnie zauważą.  
Zresztą, nie wiem, czy będzie mi to pasować, jak będę sławna.

Нас вообще-то трое было. Каждый вечер втроём на дискотеку. А потом Серёгу с Витьком в армию забрали. Я ещё им и завидовал типа тельняшки, крапов и берета. Ага, весной вернулись. Серёгу теперь дискотека не фукает - у него ног нет. А Витёк лежит лицом к стене. По нём психушка плачет. Теперь мне повестку прислали.(...) Я был в команде, так под придуркой закасил, аж сам поверил. Талант у меня! Артистом буду!

Какого хрена ты там от отчизны ждёшь?

Её работами и так ты сыт по горло.

А здесь пускай за песню кинут жалкий грош

Кивни, но гордо.

In comparison to its Russian equivalent, the Polish version of the song and its passages of spoken text sound quite neutral and even trivial. Jurij Rashencev, the author of the Russian libretto and lyrics, realises the gulf between Polish conditions and mentality and Russian experiences connected with the horrors of war against Afghanistan and then Chechenia. Undoubtedly, the Russian version is much more tragic. Thus, in this particular case the Russian spectator is not expected to share the cultural background presupposed by the author of the original text - the main aim is to bring the musical closer to him and substitute those elements that are crucial for understanding the message.

The translation of the next lyrics, *Szyba*, does not differ from its original to such degree. Both texts describe the feelings of loneliness, separation, helplessness and powerlessness. However, the Russian version still conveys deeper emotions referring to the cultural background of the target language society, which includes such appalling historical events as those mentioned above:

Pytają wszyscy, skąd jesteś i co robisz  
To im wystarczy, że imię jakieś masz  
Nie musisz odpowiadać i mówić im o sobie  
Bo zamiast ciebie oni widzą twarz.

Myślałam wtedy, że nie ma na co czekać  
Czas szybko mija, a życie jedno jest  
To nie był łatwy gest, mówili, że uciekam  
Z biletem w dłoni, w jedną stronę rejs

Co dzień ta sama zabawa się zaczyna  
I przypomina dziecinne twoje sny  
Chcesz rozbić tafłę szkła, a ona się ugina  
I tam są wszyscy, a naprzeciw - ty  
Chcesz rozbić tafłę szkła, a ona się ugina  
I tam są wszyscy, a naprzeciw - ty

Zostałam sama, więc piszę długie listy

Pieniądzy nie mam. Zbyt mało jeszcze wiem  
Poznaję dużo słów, rozumiem prawie wszystko  
A świat wygląda jakby był za szkłem.

Gdy obojętnie mijają mnie przechodnie  
Próbuję wierzyć, że przetrze się ta mgła  
Że będę mogła znów naprawdę czegoś dotknąć  
i cud się stanie - zniknie tafła szkła  
Co dzień ta sama...

„Стекло”

Лишь только имя, да может быть занятие  
Вот всё, что люди желают знать о нас  
Когда же всё, что мучит, готова рассказать я  
От них лишь холод, холод всякий раз.

Чего же ждать мне, подумала тогда я  
Ведь жизнь одна лишь и так летят года.  
Легко ли было мне уйти из дома зная  
Нельзя обратно, можно лишь туда.

Жизнь - это клетка, да клетка где одна ты  
Иль сон который и в детстве ты знала  
В нём от других людей стеклом отделена ты  
И как не бьёшься - не разбито стекла.  
В нём от других людей стеклом отделена ты  
И как не бьёшься - не разбито стекла.

Когда мне грустно, тогда пишу я письма  
Куда - не знаю. Не знаю и кому.  
Но между ним и мной опять стекло повисло  
Опять преграда каждому письму.

Стекла так много, глаза витрин у окна  
Я так надеюсь, что вот исчезнет мгла  
Случится чудо вдруг и вдребезги все стёкла  
И между нами больше нет стекла.  
Жизнь - это клетка, да клетка...

The Russian translation contains some words and expressions that emphasize the state of hopelessness more strongly than in the Polish text and, what is more important, may be understood as a historical allusion to the communist era. 'Life' has been compared to a 'cage' which also may be easily associated with the conditions in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless such an explanation would suggest the necessity of interpreting the musical politically.

## Conclusion

The examples discussed in the article show that all translated texts are to some degree hybrids since each of them can be viewed as a transplant of the source text into an alien, target culture environment. In the process of translation the form-content unity of the source text is disrupted. Inevitably some pressure is exerted upon the target language, as the transfer of foreign elements is impossible without a certain 'violence'.

The translator, as it has been proved, should be an 'intercultural mediator'. As Michaela Wolf writes in her study of aspects of cultural anthropology in translation, 'translating between cultures' means that 'other' meanings are transferred to (con) texts of the industrialised world which is coined by its institutions, traditions, and its history (1997:128). Such intercultural activity requires a carefully considered choice of cultural strategy. The choice, however, should be subject to the purpose of

translation and the message of the source language text. Thus, a creative translator should be always mindful of the best solution available.

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## Kultūrinės vertimo problemos

### Santrauka

Vertimas yra suprantamas kaip specifinis kultūrinio bendravimo veiksmas. Vertėjas yra kitos kultūros, tekste nusakytos užsienio kalba, “pirmasis skaitytojas” ir todėl turi ją pristatyti pirminiu procesu. Mokytiis versti jam reiškia mokytiis skaityti, t.y. pateikti reikšmes kurios yra priimtinos tai kultūrinei bendruomenei, kuriai priklauso skaitytojas. Kiekvienas išverstas tekstas tikslinei visuomenei, kuriai originalas yra neprieinamas, yra ir kitokio, naujo skaitymo būdo šaltinis už kurį vertėjui yra atsakingas.

Kaip jau pastebėta, tokios sąveikos tarp dviejų ar daugiau kultūrų vertimo proceso pasekoje sukuriamas “hibridinis” tekstas, kuris pasirodo tikslinėje kultūroje, priimant kai kuriuos originalo kalba parašyto teksto bruožus. “Hibridinį” tekstą galima apibūdinti kaip kompromiso tarp dviejų ar daugiau kultūrų produktą.

Straipsnyje kalbama apie sąveiką ir tarpkultūrinę veiklą dėl “vertimo iš kultūros į kultūrą”. Aptariami literatūriniai Vladimiro Nabokovo ir Helen Fielding tekstai ir miuziklo *Metro* dainų lyrika skirtingomis kalbomis.

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