Relativity as a Translation Tool
for Mythology-based Texts

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The methodology of this preliminary investigation involves the idea of translation as informational process. Most of the challenges in translation are connected with the entropy that grows all the more the wider the gap between the source and target cultures. In some cases, the gap is so wide that it makes a text seem untranslatable. This article discusses another case of untranslatability vs translatability, which results in translating of the untranslatable, i.e. of mythology-based texts, a special type of stories where mythic allusions, personages, places and/or episodes are borrowed from the national myth lore and immersed in a plot by a contemporary author. With this kind of information we face numerous challenges of untranslatability. Meeting the challenges, the translator has to invent or discover a variety of translation tools that can help to regulate the measure of informational entropy. One of such tools is the relativity of variants that presupposes choosing compatibles rather than standard equivalents. A few types of such compatibles have been explored on the examples of Irish contemporary literature.

Keywords: entropy, literary translation, myth-based text, informational capacity, translation tools, (un)translatability, relative compatibles.

Introduction

One of the everlasting mysteries of translation is transplant of the source values to the target culture. It becomes possible in the course of creative efforts of the Translator who surmounts challenges of the untranslatable. Mythology has been always placed among those challenges and never is entropy so intensive as in texts associated with mythological images and ideas. On the one hand, it may seem easy to transliterate or loan mythic names and thus introduce them into the target cultural use. But the borrowed signs turn out to be malicious shape-shifters and begin to live on their own in the foreign environment.

The *Baba-Yaga* in her *hut-on-chicken's-legs* acquires features that differ from those of her Russian counterpart *Баба-Яга в избушке на курьих ножках*. One may have a look at pictures and illustrations in the books of Russian Fairy Tales published in Russia – and abroad to see the difference. It further spreads into all kinds of using the word out of its habitual fairy-tale context as a precedent-related name. The borrowed *эльф* is not the *elf* of British tales, which becomes evident when we translate literary works where the word is applied to a human being: when Mr Rochester compares Jane Eyre to an elf it does not imply that she is a fairy beauty (which she is not) but

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implies only that she appears as unexpectedly as a forest spirit and is as dangerous and hostile to the human as her 'folks' in the forest.

So what happens to mythical names in mythology-based texts when we transfer them from one culture to another?

Myth and mythology-based texts

Discussing the issue of untranslatability, Anthony Pym differentiates between "the basic narrative and definitional structure of the myth" (Pym, 1998). This is a valuable idea to apply to studying informational challenge that any myth presents in translation. Mythical values, images, ideas and events are deeply rooted into the cultural traditions of a people, perceived as a part of the whole and, apart from scholars, without explanation. For a native, a myth is a true (or imaginative) narrative that does not require any definitions and is accepted as a traditional value rendered by a long chain of narrators. Perhaps it is this value that makes myth wholly or, at least, partly untranslatable. As soon as the myth, clad in the dress of another language, appears in the context of another culture it loses its natural valuable structure first of all due to the losses of information, in other words, it suffers intensive entropy, which predicts all kinds of misinterpreting.

Misinterpreting begins with the translator. As a bearer of two cultures and two languages the translator is usually stronger connected with one of them, and this is especially true as far as mythology is concerned. Mythology appears in our early childhood and grows and transforms with us in such a way that we perceive it as a part of our cultural environment and our mutual interrelation may be various but it is always natural. With our modern world-views and education we may doubt or reject the reality of gods, cultural heroes, higher and lower demonology, spirits and other personages, their deeds and misdeeds,

their dubious and ambiguous nature, yet all these characters live in our informational space and make part of our system of values. Verbal signs that present them in this system, be it proper or common names, phraseology or special order of words, penetrate into basic structures of our mind and appear promptly when the corresponding association is needed (Лосев, 1991). When we perceive and estimate a sign that belongs to another mythological tradition it invariably and subconsciously undergoes the impact of the 'native' myth, which results in some informational shifting. *Baba-Yaga* as interpreted by an English speaker (and reader) is 'a wicked witch' though this steady definition may contradict the context of the narrative where she helps rather than harms. *Эльф* for a Russian speaker is beautiful (small or tall) and attractive even if more stories describe him or her as an ugly and malicious spirit.

Such contradictions and discrepancies form the basis for entropy in translating mythology and perceiving translated myths in the other culture. Yet further misinterpreting develops in recognizing and reconstructing textual functions of mythological vocabulary and phrases when they occur not in the original primal myths but in the so called mythology-based texts. The difference between myth and mythology-based text is in the nature of authorship. Primal myth is created as a collective text in the long run of centuries when every myth-narrator is also its interpreter and there may co-exist several if not many versions of the myth in which names, events, and phraseology can vary, split or merge (Campbell, 1990; Campbell, 1973; Леви-Стросс, 2000; Малиновский, 1998; Леви-Брюль, 1994; Стеблин-Каменский, 1976; etc.).

Unlike this collective process, mythology-based texts are created on the basis of primal myth by the individual author and the author's message is at the same time more certain and less universal than that of the collective myth.

Among carriers of mythical functions in such texts the translator can come across proper names (overt mythical beings), common names (covert mythical beings) and set magic phrases of symbolic value (sacred mythical concepts). These carriers acquire independent informational value based on the interrelation between the traditional stability of myth perception and the individual author's message. I offer to discuss some translator tools, i.e. relative compatibles that create the 'supposed equivalence without identity of meaning' (Ricoeur, 2006) and help to minimize informational losses and to avoid the crucial growth of entropy in translation.

Overt mythical names in translation

Unlike proper names in general without objective reference, mythological proper names refer to a particular object that cannot be verified in practical reality because it belongs to fideic concepts and is not found in the material 'world of things'. Our perception of such objects rests mainly on the corpora of mythological texts, i.e. on the functions rather than constants.

In the primal myth such names are directly or indirectly perceived as attributes of sacred (mythical) beings whose nature is incomprehensible (Померанцева, 1985). Thus, primal myth-names may have any counterpart in the target language to perform this basic function of a sacred attribute of the incognisable and stay beyond any standard logic (Казакова, 2013). Under such condition the names are preferably transliterated or semantically borrowed to produce some mythical impression that may or may not exist in the world-view of the source culture. This illogical, paradoxical kind of information fits the strange if not alien verbal signs that appear in the target language as markers of the original mystery and play the role of equivalents although their informational capacity is limited. The Irish Conan Maòl will appear in the Russian translation

of the Fionn myth lore as *Конан Маол*, which sounds mysterious enough and fits the concept of some cultural hero in the traditional mythological context. The common reader does not even need any definition or special knowledge to recognize some mythical being whose particular features are not important to learn. So the transliterated name becomes more or less accepted as an equivalent and presupposes to present total equivalence in all coming texts.

However, out of the primal mythical context where it is enough to know that Conan Maòl is one of the Fianna heroes, one may come across the name in a myth or myth-like tale of an individual Irish author and thus face the phenomenon of extra information implied in the name without which the text lacks its associative power. For instance, modern Irish myth collector and narrator Eddie Lenihan (Lenihan, 2006) develops the tradition of the living myth lore, and his individual message is always slightly ironical; in his tales it is significant to know that Conan Maòl is a particular kind of a hero, a trickster, even if he appears a brave and brutal warrior in some myths. This information is implied in the very name: Maòl means 'bald-headed' and this is not only a feature of his appearance but a personal quality that in the corpora of Irish myths is characteristic for a trickster; Lenihan plays upon this particular quality without comment, and in his individual mythology Conan Maòl is often made fun of, not really scorned, though. In this respect, Maòl should not be regarded as a proper name but an alias that requires semantic method of translation. If so, the translator faces the multiplicity of supposed equivalents; both are only relatively compatible with the original name and both lack the complete informational capacity of the source word: Конан *Лысый (Плешивый, Безволосый)*. Besides, it comes into contradiction with the traditional (total) equivalent *Маол* and may appeal to hybrid strategy (*Маол-*

Плешивый), which also implies relativity yet reduces the entropy described above.

Covert mythical names in translation

It often happens that in a myth lore supernatural beings bear names of things, human beings and animals, i.e. common names that serve as a sort of cover for their sacred nature. Such covers may be even doubled in author's tales, especially those that develop a mythological tradition in the form of individual myth narrative. One of such common covers refers to a mythical personage named 'the hag'. Usually it is translated into Russian as *ведьма* but its narrow meaning may turn out to be insufficient since its expressive and evaluative power limits the informational capacity of the original name. 'The hag' implies such semantic components as 'female, old, ugly, belligerent, malicious', etc. Among many attributes of the hag is a stick or a crutch which she uses to support her crooked body of a cripple: so there is another component – 'disabled'.

In his myth-like tale of Fionn Mac Cumhail (Finn McCool) Eddie Lenihan makes Fionn meet such a hag by the road to the seashore. This tale is a burlesque allusion to the famous episode in the traditional Fionn myth lore when Fionn fights the ugly water monster, defeats and disables him and takes away his treasure, a purse with precious magic items in it. Now, in Lenihan's tale, Fionn, deceived and betrayed by the hag (*cailleach*), takes her by the throat, grabs her purse with money and throws her up into the sky. This mock battle alludes to the heroic fighting mentioned above, and all the details of the original mythical battle are reflected in it, as it were, in a curved mirror. The hag is more often referred to as 'a creature', and at first Fionn is not even sure whether it as a woman or a man.

The informational capacity of the original chain of names (*hug, creature, cailleach, cripple, discharged mermaid*) is altogether enough to restore the image of the mythical water monster but turned inside out. If we choose the strategy of direct (standard) semantic equivalence and pick up such Russian words as *ведьма, старуха с клюкой, разжалованная русалка*, the result will be very far from productive: such counterparts, compatible with the original words separate, are not compatible with them as a group because of the informational losses that lead altogether to the entropy and destroy the natural mythical allusion to the giant water monster defeated by Fionn in the traditional myth. More than that, the group also implies that the tale is related to the Irish mythology, which is nationwide recognisable. Once again, Lenihan's story demands for the relative Russian compatibles taking into account not only the common meanings but also all possible implications of these names.

Mythical phrases in translation

In the mythical vocabulary there are not only names but also phrases that may look common on the surface yet imply sacred or magical references to the power of gods and other supernatural beings. Of interest to translation among them is swearing.

Lenihan's Fionn and other heroes swear by gods or their attributes that, supposedly, are well-known to the reader so that he (she) could estimate this or that nuance of connection between the traditional mythical hero and Lenihan's version. Meeting the *cailleach*, Fionn swears *By the silver hand of Nuada!* The standard translation strategy results in the Russian phrase *(Клянусь) серебряной рукой Нуады!* However, in the context of Lenihan's tale this phrase is equal to an interjection of surprise and must sound natural and mythical-based at a time. Mythical it is for the common Russian reader but in no way natural: the name *Nuada* may be associated with some deity, although the nature of the deity is too vague, especially with the silver hand. One

will need a definition (Nuada, or Nuadu is a warrior-god and since he lost his hand in battle it was replaced with a silver equivalent by a magic healer) and even with it the Russian phrase does not fit the situation. The translator must take into consideration possible communicative consequences: the Russian reader would rather expect a more energetic expression from Fionn, the famous warrior and head of the Fianna. In this case the relative substitute for the source swearing formula *By…!* may be some expressive verb or inverted set phrase, for example, *Разрази (порази, тресни и т.п.) меня Нуаду!*

Complications may occur in case of descriptions of a sacred or magic object, especially when such a phrase hints at the magic attitude as a prejudice, which often happens in Lenihan's mythical tales as a part of implicitly ironical message. The 'magic spot' is mentioned as *Geata na Spioraid*, which is the Irish name for the Gate of Spirits, 'the notorious haunted spot on the road' where trees grow especially thick. This phrase makes a double problem for translation. First, it is in Irish addressed to the Irish audience in the English context. Second, its standard Russian equivalent *Ворота духов* is not structured properly as a message and its ambiguity produces the effect of entropy. To restore the message the translator can consider a few functionally equivalent though semantically different variants: *Врата нечисти, Проклятое место и т.п.* Such a descriptive phrase to be supplied with the transliteration of the Irish phrase represents the original information in a more explicit mode, yet it is more comprehensible for a Russian reader.

Conclusion

These few complications associated with mythology-based texts grow into entropy because of the insufficient or wrong presuppositions with which a reader in the target culture perceives such a text, and then the choice of equivalent may lead to conflict between the original message and interpretation of the target text.

To differentiate the two approaches to the translation of proper myth-names, we distinguish two fundamentally different principles, standard (superficial) equivalence and relative (supposed) equivalence. Actually, with the former mode the translator feels safe and sure, while 'expanding horizon' of interpretation he (she) appears in a tricky situation. Hopefully, this tricky strategy of choosing relative equivalents will allow something of value to be introduced into the course of communication between languages and cultures in the most shaky sphere of the usage and abusage of mythological values in translation.

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Относительность как переводческий прием
при передаче мифологически связанных текстов

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Методология данного предварительного исследования основана на представлении о переводе как информационном процессе. Многие проблемы перевода связаны с ростом энтропии в зависимости от различий между исходной и переводящей культурой. В некоторых случаях различия столь велики, что перевод представляется невозможным. В данной статье рассматривается ситуация конфликта переводимости/непереводимости, когда переводу подлежит непереводимый текст, а именно мифологически связанный текст, то есть особый вид текстов, в которых из традиционной мифологии заимствуются мифологические аллюзии, персонажи, места и события и в разнообразных функциях включаются в сюжет, построенный современным автором как продолжение мифологической традиции. Построенная таким образом художественная информация сопряжена с многочисленными проблемами в процессе перевода. Решая такие проблемы, переводчик вынужден использовать или изобретать ряд специфических приемов, направленных на снятие уровня информационной энтропии. Одним из таких приемов является вариативная относительность, то есть выбор совместимых по функции знаков вместо стандартных эквивалентов. Некоторые типы такой совместимости обнаружены на примере перевода мифологически связанных произведений современной ирландской литературы.

Ключевые слова: энтропия, художественный перевод, мифологически связанный текст, перевод как информационный процесс, переводческие приемы, (не)переводимость, относительная совместимость.