

УДК 651.926:82.035

Polycultural Space of a Film as a Translator Challenge

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Received 3.10.2011, received in revised form 10.10.2011, accepted 17.10.2011

The author examines an issue of taking into consideration the culture peculiarities in the film dialogue translation by the example of "The Cuckoo" (directed by A. Rogozhkin, Russia, 2002). The cinematographic space of the film creates a particular communicative space for characters who belong to three different ethnoses and do not share a common language of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: film dialogue, polycultural space of a film, cross-cultural communication.

We live in a polycultural society various problems of which are redoubled in the context of globalization. Consider, for example, the united Europe and postulated freedom of movement and employment that, as it is believed, are promoted by the single European currency, European Parliament and European Court.

But why do the French who live by the Spanish border refuse to speak Spanish while the Spaniards pretend not to understand French even if they live in Girona, a town at the French border? The British who come to France across the English Channel speak only English in the local shops which they visit to buy goods (including the English ones) at a lower price. Why don't they speak French especially taking into consideration the fact that it takes them no more than five hours by ferry Southampton – Le Havre to get there? A talk with representatives of particular European cultures is enough to understand the crucial and

undeniable role a language plays as the means of cross-cultural communication.

However, the subject of our research doesn't give us an opportunity to analyze the language situation in Europe. We set a more narrow and specific aim—to study the film dialogue translation within the polycultural space of the film. Why do we put it in such a way? The reason is that a translator of the film dialogue works at the crossroads of at least two cultures when he or she has to interpret the situation almost immediately. There is no need for such an immediate translation when a translator deals with a written text that can be read in a more thorough way and addressed as many times as necessary. Neither does it happen in a situation of interpretation proper when an interpreter confines himself to the informative aspect of interpretation rather than rendering of the artistic effect. In case of the film dialogue translation a translator's role is that of a receiver

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and transmitter of the information coming from the screen, his primary goal being to transfer verbal components of the information. But the question arises: is it as easy as it seems?

The best way to illustrate the “direct contact” of cultures in the film translation is to consider “The Cuckoo” directed by Alexander Rogozhkin (Russia, 2002), the film crew of which was awarded the State Prize of the Russian Federation in Arts and Literature in 2004.

The film is set in 1944 a few days before Finland pulled out of World War Two. An inventive solution of the cinematographic space problem in the film presents a great interest. The events take place in a remote northern region of Karelia reminding us about Agatha Christie’s stories where the author sets artificial limits (usually by means of natural disasters) to the freedom of characters’ mobility to build up mystery and intensify readers interest towards the plot. While Agatha Christie’s characters mostly share one and the same lingoculture, three characters of “The Cuckoo” belong to different cultures: Veikko, a Finn, Ivan, a Russian, and Anni, a Sámi woman (the name of the people originates from the Finnish word meaning “the people of the periphery”). The three come across each other in the limited cinematographic space of the film.

The national identity of the characters would not play such a crucial role had they shared a common, probably the fourth, language of cross-cultural communication that could provide the basis for their mutual understanding, prevent a communication gap and, consequently, conflicts caused by it. Unfortunately, they lack it. The fact that Veikko and Anni belong to ethnographically similar ethnoses living in the neighboring regions doesn’t promote a success of their verbal communication. The Sámi is an autonomous ethnic group whose main livelihood was a combination of reindeer

husbandry, fishing and hunting. Moreover, the Finns and Sámi similarity is ambiguous from the anthropological point of view. The Sámi people are of the Laponoid subtype, the distinguishing features of which are low height, broad face, dark hair, eyes and complexion. The Finns on the contrary belong to the northern subtype of European race, representatives of which are typically of medium or above medium height, they have oval faces and, quite frequently, fair hair and blue eyes.

The Sámi developed into an independent ethnos about 3000 years ago. According to a Sámi legend, a son of the Sun, a harmless giant, went to the North to find a girl who would become his wife. So he did find her and won her heart by his strength and wisdom. However the dowry turned out to be far from good – as the legend goes, evil brothers of the girl haunted the newly-weds. The couple’s children were born literally on the run and the father immediately taught them to ski. They were the first Sámi who gradually miniaturized to the normal human height but did not lose their inherent wisdom.

Scholars say that the Sámi people possess a culture of great originality. This people became, to some extent, an ethnographic mystery because their originality is not easy to explain. The Sámi language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family but takes a peculiar place in the typology as one third of the substrate vocabulary doesn’t have correspondences in the kindred languages. In the Sámi language, to be more exact, in several dissimilar dialects there is a bulk of words used to describe land, water, snow or stillness before a reindeer is born. However, in their language there is no equivalent of the verb “to possess” so much cherished by the Western civilization: why should you take something as your own if you as well as the others can simply borrow it? To add to that, the Sámi were not allowed to speak their

mother tongue and their peculiar way of singing was considered the greatest form of peccancy as the traditional religion representatives viewed it as a talk with disreputable spirits and the devil (Саамы [Electronic resource]).

Let us revert to the film “The Cuckoo”. The characters find themselves in a single and rather isolated space by some chance and it is the chance that determines their relationships which, as the plot develops, are to turn into a peculiar love triangle based on the verbal incomprehension. The fact is that Anni, Veikko and Ivan literally speak different languages – Russian, Finnish and Sámi. That is the reason why Ivan, a former captain of the USSR army fails to understand that Veikko is not a Nazi but a pacifist: he had been forced to put on an SS uniform and then chained to a rock as a sniper on a suicide mission. Thanks to his strong will to live Veikko succeeds in freeing himself and makes up his mind to put the war behind him. Misunderstanding results in Ivan’s several attempts to kill Veikko which are not successful only because the Russian has not yet recovered from the concussion.

The episode when the characters meet presents a great interest. At their initial meeting Veikko and Anni misinterpret Ivan’s words “Pshol ty” (Fuck off!) as his name. Even in a long while, when the three get in touch with each other, though in a rather unusual way, and Ivan tries to explain that his name is “Ivan”, Veikko laughs at him as for the Finn all Russians are Ivans. None-the-less, when their roads finally part Veikko calls his ill-starred enemy “Psholty Ivan”. In their turn both men get the first words of the Sámi woman as “Anni” but her Sámi name is “Cuckoo”. Hence the film is entitled “The Cuckoo”. This word has a triple meaning. On the one hand the cuckoo (*käki*) is a nickname of lone Finnish snipers (Veikko is actually one of them). On the other hand, it also refers to Anni.

And finally it has an additional meaning – “a lone woman” that can be regarded as a reference to Anni who has not seen her husband for more than four years.

As the Finns and the Sámi are neighboring peoples, Veikko understands hardships of Anni’s life much better than Ivan does. He immediately notices that the Sámi woman will not be able to provide enough food for two adult men in winter: Anni has not got enough supplies while the reindeer herd is not numerous. However, these facts go unnoticed by Ivan.

A.I. Kelsiev, a famous naturalist, wrote that “the Lapps (Sámi) are honest, kindhearted, hospitable, cheerful people, meek in the family life” (Лопари (саамы) [Electronic resource]). And this is the case when an unprofessional actress of peculiar appearance and charming indigenusness Anni-Kristiina Juuso brings into the love triangle a unique atmosphere of going back to roots. Consider the picturesque and colorful episode when she cures Ivan. Anni cuts a vein of her reindeer to get some blood for a medicinal drink of reindeer milk while whispering that she doesn’t want to harm the animal, that whatever is done, she does it for good intentions. Another episode is no less astonishing: it shows Anni who brings Veikko back from the brink of death through a series of ancient magic rituals. She combines beating her tambourine with imitating a dog howl and chanting incantations her grandmother used to save the ill and ailing from death.

As we have mentioned above, a translator’s aim is to transfer verbal components of the film dialogue. Yet, the translator will never succeed if he or she doesn’t take into account the visual imagery of the film, general behavior and speech peculiarities of its characters. For example, Veikko’s constant chatting in “The Cuckoo” sorts ill with the general belief that the Finns are not very talkative. Such behavior can

be accounted for by his being euphoric about unexpected liberation from his shackles in particular and his saving from death in general. Veikko is a well-educated person (he went to a university before the war), thus he has got a rich vocabulary and speaks a grammatically correct, literate language. In contrast to Veikko Ivan is a common person of mediocre education who has become an army officer due to the wartime situation rather than his knowledge. Nevertheless, judging from Ivan's own words he is romantic, in his youth he wrote poems and even got acquainted with Sergey Yesenin, a great Russian poet.

A peculiar talk of "the deaf" is not as meaningless as it appears to be. Sometimes phrases of the three characters, especially if reinforced by gestures or sound associations, "find exact and meaningful matches". Let us consider an example of the following conversation of Ivan, Anni and Veikko.

Ivan addresses Anni pointing at mushrooms he has picked up.

Ivan: Here. To boil or to fry. Eat. We'll eat them (*supports his words with a corresponding gesture as if putting a spoon to his mouth*).

Anni: You want to go to the other world? Then sip some soup from fly-agarics. You'll get sick of these mushrooms.

Ivan (*willingly*): Oh, you don't want to cook? Don't worry. It's simple, really. My sergeant cooked them wonderfully.

Anni (*comes up to Veikko who is making a sauna chimney from clay and points at Ivan*): Psholty is going to eat mushrooms to commune with the spirits. May be, he's a shaman or a wizard?

Veikko (*casts a look at the Russian thinking that Anni is displeased with Ivan's doing nothing*): Let him rest. He's still weak from the concussion. I'll do it myself.

Ivan (*he has peeled the mushrooms and shows Anni the dixy*): Miss, I need some salt. Salt, you see?

Anni (*indignantly*): I'm not mad enough to eat them. If you wish, help yourself (*with a keep-away gesture*).

Ivan (*misinterpreting her gesture*): Oh, I see, in the house (*enters Anni's hut where he finds a traveling bag and a parcel, tears it open, reads a denunciation letter and leaves the hut in a discouraged mood*).

Ivan (*reading the denunciation*): That bastard!

Anni (*sees the letter Ivan is holding and explains*): It was brought by the water.

Ivan (*indignantly*): My political officer told on me. He, whippersnapper, has been in war for a mere weak and he informs. I treated him like a son! He writes: "let it be known that... he does not share the ideals of..." (*shows Anni the letter*).

Anni (*looks aside from her work – she's sowing off a piece of wood. She looks at the letter and nods*): The water wiped out words. The stream water cleans perfectly well. Put some laundry in it and next day it's clean (*pointing to the piece of wood*). Little flour is left. I just add some wood in it, it tastes good.

Ivan (*he is still indignant and pays no attention to Anni's words*): Here he writes my poems are weak and pitiable. He's jealous. He has written nothing but delations. It was Sergey Yesenin who encouraged me to write. My father was a taxi driver, and Yesenin took a ride from the station to a hotel. I was but a little lad sitting at the front seat and reciting my poems. He said: "you should not give it up". And he signed his photo for me (*shows her the photograph*).

Anni: Is she your wife? She's pretty. Soldiers took my husband and all our deer four years ago.

Ivan (*looking at the photo, deep in his thoughts*): See, Yesenin. And he... that snotty nosed boy! I wrote poems about love, nature, do

you see? To keep my mind off the war. And that devil...

Anni (*in a pacifying voice*): Don't worry. You're still alive. And you've got a beautiful wife. But, please, don't eat the mushrooms or you'll go nuts.

Ivan (*indifferently looking back at the fire where the mushrooms are boiling*): Ah, the mushrooms are almost done. If only you had some salt. (*Emphatically*) Salt!

Anni (*gives him an approving nod*): Yes, the mushrooms are no good to eat. Poison (*stands up*). Too much talking, you can't feed the deer with words.

The translator should clearly represent the track along which the meaning of speech of each character is developed. The point is that the above mentioned dialogue opens up the essence of the world views of the three different cultures representatives. It shows that marriage, simple and naive relations are the key values of the world view of Anni as a Sámi. It also describes Ivan, a Russian soldier so shocked by the slander unnaturally usual in the USSR of those days and so impressed by a chance meeting with the great poet who made him believe that he was a

poet too. And finally it characterizes Veikko, a young Finn, as a person whose presence of mind, common sense and quick wit help him out of all reverses of fortune.

As for the understanding of the film as an esthetic whole, it is not a big deal that the three speak different languages. What is much more important for these people who survived in the extreme situation is to feel the direct personal contact, rather than understand the meaning of words and phrases pronounced. Intonation of phrases, facial expression, gestures are the most significant part of their communication. If you press the mute key, the visual imagery of the film will show a group of people who are talking peacefully, so that you will hardly believe that they do not understand each other.

We do not know the Finnish or Sámi languages, but we can get the meaning of the film dialogue by means of visual imagery, Ivan's phrases in Russian and voice-over translation. It is well known that the main value of the literary translation is a successful rendering of the entire artistic effect. So, speaking about "The Cuckoo", we enjoy the artistic value of the film in full measure, and not without the translator's help.

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Поликультурное пространство фильма как вызов переводчику

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Автор рассматривает проблему учета культурно специфичного при переводе кинодиалога на примере анализа фильма А. Рогожкина «Кукушка» (Россия, 2002), кинематографическое пространство которого создает особое коммуникативное пространство для персонажей, относящихся к трем различным этносам в отсутствие единого языка межкультурного общения.

Ключевые слова: кинодиалог, поликультурное пространство фильма, межкультурная коммуникация.
