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“Blind Idiot” Translation or Beware of Idioms

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The present paper focuses on idioms as a factor of cultural untranslatability. The issue of idioms translation has been raised by a number of researchers, but they have been dealing with idioms in their canonical form, not taking into account such particular cases as sound-symbolic or transformed idioms, posing yet even greater problems for a translator. The paper approaches idioms from various perspectives, identifying two sets of problems in their translation – on the “input” and on the “output” stages.

Keywords: Idiom, translation, ethos, cultural (un)translatability, sound symbolism, transformed idioms.

Introduction

The problem of culture, mentality and language interrelation has a long history in linguistics and the study of translation, where it was considered at a certain stage to be crucial and to predetermine the unattainability of translation in principle. Even now, with a more rational and realistic attitude towards translatability, the notion of cultural untranslatability (Catford, 1965) focusing on the category of ethos remains an issue in the scientific agenda.

Phraseology is exactly what constitutes the cultural uniqueness, the spirit, the ethos of a language, i.e. the essence most difficult to render in translation. And since most of the translational research was focused on overcoming various aspects Untranslatability, the problem of translating phraseology has justly received considerable attention. In the present

paper we shall attempt to sum up the various problems one faces when translating phraseology, encompassing not only conventional idioms, but their transforms; dealing with both “input” and “output” problems.

Theoretical Framework

The problem of translating idioms has been approached from various viewpoints and perspectives. These can be roughly divided into following categories:

A) Empirical descriptive, inductive researches aimed at reviewing ways of rendering idioms and the degree of preserving the original’s phraseological character in translation.

Among the first works in this field belongs to A.V. Kunin, the author of the Russian-English dictionary of idioms. This being his goal, it is understandable that he was mostly concerned

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with the search for nearest equivalents to idioms in the languages he compared (Kunin 1964). He was thus among the first to indicate that finding an equivalent for an idiom is often far from a trivial task.

Another path has been chosen by N.L. Shadrin, who compared the idiomatic portraits of the various translations of A. Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit* (Shadrin, 1977).

Sayamon Sornsuwannasri's research is dedicated to the ways of rendering idioms in translations of children literature (C.S. Lewis novels) into Thai by S. Boonyarattawech (Sornsuwannasri, 2010). The two named works are similar in:

- taking textual material as the basis for their research;
- restricting the material basis for the research to the works by one author, in the latter case –one translator as well, which does not allow for general conclusions.

Still the data received is interesting, for such works allow to identify the ways of dealing with idioms employed by practicing translators, while the latter work is particularly interesting as it highlights the addressee factor in choosing the translation strategy.

Yet another approach was chosen by N.N. Panchenko (Panchenko, 1998), whose goal was to compare the idiomatic representations of some particular conceptual space in different languages. This perspective yields most valuable data on discrepancies in idioms relating to one and the same situation, as the latter can be assigned different properties in different languages.

B) Deductive researches based on a certain classification of ways to render idioms in translation or classifications of the idioms themselves. In fact, the two classifications should be made one, since the type of an idiom is one of the factors determining the translation strategy choice.

S. Vlachov and S. Florin dedicate a large section of their book to dealing with idioms. They start with stating that many of their predecessors (N. Aristov, Z. Rogova to name just a few) tried to base their theory of idioms translation on their linguistic typology, which is not appropriate, since such an approach ignores the interlingual relations, focusing on the intralingual ones. The authors suggest drawing the classification on the translatability criterion, i.e. the presence of a ready equivalent to the original idiom in the target language. Thus all the idioms can be divided into 3 groups, with a clear translation strategy for each of them:

1. The relation between the original and target language idioms can be described by the sign "=", therefore it is subject to phraseological translation by the ready equivalent;

2. The original idiom has a partial equivalent(s) in the target language, the relation between them can be described by the sign "≈"; the choice of the translation variant is determined by the context, but it is usually a phraseological translation;

3. The original idiom is unique and has neither equivalent nor analogues in the target language (the corresponding sign is "≠"); therefore such an idiom is subject to non-phraseological translation by a synonymous word or phrase (Vlachov et al., 1980: 181-183).

This is a truly translational approach, giving justified, solid recommendations, applicable to most cases. As any typology, this one too is a simplification. But the fact that the rule has exceptions does not defy the rule itself.

C) The search for exceptions from the rule stated above is the focus of the next approach we should mention.

I. Borodyanskiy gives a brilliant illustration of a difficulty one can face dealing with the seemingly simplest case – that of an international idiom, a biblical one. The task appears to be a

trivial one – to find the corresponding biblical phrase in the target language canonical text and do the substitution. But the analysis of the available translations of the following fragments from Ch. Dickens’ novels featuring the biblical idiom ‘*to heap coals of fire on somebody’s head*’ yields unexpected conclusions:

1. “*He shuns me*”, said Sampson, “*even when I would, as I may say, heap coals of fire upon his head*” (*The Old Curiosity Shop*).

2. “*She was full of clemency and conciliation. She had laid in several caldrons of live coals and was prepared to heap them on the heads of her enemies*” (*Martin Chuzzlewit*).

When translated into Russian by their biblical equivalents these idioms lose transparency, the whole episodes become nonsensical. The translator in this case has to approach the task creatively and use a complex strategy, combining the original biblical image with elements clarifying the metaphor, states I. Borodyanskiy (Borodyanskiy, 1963). Thus, we cannot but face it that even the international character of an idiom does not guarantee a simple solution.

A.L. Korolova considers idioms in general as tricky, misleading elements, pregnant with various mistakes. The author tries to develop a typology of “reefs” most dangerous for translators dealing with idiomatic expressions, which includes the following categories:

- failure to identify the idiom as such, resulting in literal translation;
- translation by a pseudoequivalent target language idiom due to a certain closeness in the form and image of the two idioms that can be qualified as paronyms. Thus, it might be tempting to translate *more dead than alive* as *ни жив, ни мертв*, which is not correct, since the first idiom

denotes the state of exhaustion, while the second – of fright. Another example might be the very idiom the translation of which provoked N.S. Khrushchev to recollect the notorious *Kuzma’s mother*. As the legend has it, the reason for the outburst was the rendering of the original *you are barking at the moon* (you require the impossible) as *вы воете на луну* (you are suffering from ennui).

- confusing formally close, nearly identical expressions, one of which is a free collocation, while the other – an idiom. A. Korolova illustrates this case by the pair *to make a good time* and *to have a good time*.
- interlingual homonyms (*wind in the head* meaning *conceit* vs. *ветер в голове* meaning *thoughtlessness*; *to run smb. to earth* meaning *to find even under the earth* vs. *загнать кого-л. в землю* – *to cause to die*).
- partial interlingual synonyms, functioning as each other’s equivalents in one particular meaning and type of context, but not in others;
- idioms that are close in referential meaning and form, but differing in connotation and distribution (Korolova, 1987)

Among others the problem of idioms translation has been touched upon by such prominent researchers as J. Delisle (1984), E. Nida (1964), G. Toury (1980), J.-P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet (1968). The general idea is that failure to understand and render the original idioms correctly results in the so called “blind idiot” translation. The term refers to an experiment in machine translation that took place in the beginning of the machine translation era. Allegedly, the expression *out of sight, out of mind* was first translated from English to Russian, and then back into English, whereby it turned

into *invisible idiot* or *blind idiot*, according to differing reports.

Problems by Translating Idioms

It might be stated that there are two blocks of problems in dealing with idioms: their identification and interpreting at the first phase of the translation process, that of input, and finding the adequate way of rendering them in the target language, at the second phase, that of output.

As can be seen from the above review of approaches, the case of canonic idioms translation has received in-depth analysis. There has been given the classification of idioms and recommendations as to translation strategy for each category; finally the theory was enhanced by the indication of most typical translation mistakes.

We would like to draw the attention of the reader to certain cases of idioms, which somehow divert from the canon.

A. Dealing with phonetically motivated idioms

Although the idea of sound symbolism dates back to ancient times, it being initially voiced by Plato, it has been largely ignored by linguists, which is apparently due to the exceedingly high status of F. de Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign arbitrariness. Only in the second half of the previous century the idea of iconicity as inherent in language signs became to be recognized thanks to efforts on the part of such prominent advocates as L. Bloomfield, G. Genette, R. Jakobson, O. Jespersen, E. Sapir among others.

In Russia the study of sound symbolism became the focus of the science of phonosemantics, which is primarily associated with the name of S.V. Voronin, who gave a comprehensive classification of iconic elements in a language

and developed the complex method of identifying them (Voronin, 1992).

With phonosemantics as an established and recognized branch of linguistics, the problem of iconicity received its share of coverage (Bartashova, 1986; Tatarinova, 2006; Shvetsova, 2011), but the issue has hardly ever been seriously approached from the translational viewpoint (see review in Bartashova et al., 2011).

Similarly, very little research data can be found in respect to sound symbolism in idioms, apart from the sheer statement of existence of such a phenomenon by D. Dobrovolsky and E. Piirainen, who distinguish between idioms with semantic motivation (iconic and symbol-based motivation) on the one hand, and index-based motivation. The latter category includes in particular cases of phonetic motivation, illustrated by such examples in German as *den heiligen Ulrich anrufen; nach Melk gehen*, where both proper nouns are imitations of the sound of vomiting, the latter being the meaning of the cited idioms (Dobrovolsky, Piirainen 2005).

English also abounds in such elements: *flip one's lips, blow the whistle, crack the whip, spill the beans, button one's lips, pull strings, kick the bucket, kiss the Blarney Stone* – all of these idioms contain sound symbolic elements, but this factor is never taken into account by their translation.

B. Dealing with transformed idioms

In this case the speaker violates the conventional form of an idiom in order to achieve a certain stylistic effect, usually the humorous one. One can distinguish between certain kinds of transformations.

1. Merging idioms:

E.g. "What are you doing here?"
growled the watchdog.

"Just killing time," replied Milo
apologetically. "You see "

"KILLING TIME!" roared the dog—so furiously that his alarm went off. "It's bad enough wasting time without killing it." And he shuddered at the thought. (N. Juster, "The Phantom Tollbooth")

Since in case of a stylistic device it is the device and its function, and not the words, that are to be the translation invariant, the only way to render this transform is to find a pair of target language idioms to merge. Luckily, the two original idioms have equivalents in Russian – *терять время* and *убивать время* and one can resort to nearly literal translation.

2. Expansion of the image at the basis of the idiom:

E.g. *At that you're in hot water again," she observed...*

"It's hot all right," Mason admitted, "and it keeps getting hotter. It won't be long until it starts boiling." (E.S. Gardner, "The Case of the Drowsy Mosquito")

The nearest equivalent to the idiom in question – *be in hot water* – is *попасть в переплет*, which is inadequate here, as it does not allow for a required expansion. A close enough image though can be found in the expression *быть / вертеться как уж на сковородке*, which can serve as a contextual analogue in the translation.

3. Evoking the double meaning of the expression:

E.g. *Alice sighed wearily. 'I think you might do something better with the time,' she said, 'than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.'*

'If you knew Time as well as I do,' said the Hatter, 'you wouldn't talk about wasting IT. It's HIM.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Alice.

'Of course you don't!' the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. 'I dare say you never even spoke to Time!'

'Perhaps not,' Alice cautiously replied: 'but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.'

'Ah! that accounts for it,' said the Hatter. 'He won't stand beating' (Carroll)

In the cited passage there are two idioms that actualize two meanings – idiomatic and literal – at once. Both have the component *time*. In Alice's speech the two idioms function as set expressions, while in the Hatter's magical discourse by means of personification indicated by capitalization (*Time*) and corresponding pronominalization (*HIM, He*), time is positioned as a thinking and acting agent (*He won't stand beating; whisper a hint to Time*), which results in the expressions falling free.

Literal translation of the passage is hampered by the fact that the nearest equivalent to the second idiom (*to beat time*) – *отбивать такт*, turns out inappropriate as it does not feature the element *time*. That is why this idiom is substituted by another one, which is somewhat different in meaning, but allows for the play on words. Thus N. Demurova recreates in her translation the original device and manages to preserve the effect meant by the author:

- *Если вам нечего делать, – сказала она с досадой, – придумали бы что-нибудь получше загадок без ответа. А так только попусту теряете время!*

- *Если бы ты знала Время также хорошо, как я, – сказал Болваничик, – ты бы этого не сказала. Его не потеряешь! Не на такого напали!*

- *Не понимаю, – сказала Алиса.*

- *Еще бы! – презрительно встряхнул головой Болваничик. –*

Ты с ним небось никогда и не разговаривала!

- Может, и не разговаривала, – осторожно отвечала Алиса. – Зато не раз думала о том, как бы убить время!

- А-а! тогда все понятно, – сказал Болванщик. – Убить Время! Разве такое ему может понравиться!

C. Added idiomaticity

There is yet one more idiom-related problem, which consists in the emergence of additional idiomatic meaning not inherent in the original. This effect can be illustrated by the Russian translation of the Western Union advertising slogan *The fastest way to transfer money world wide*, which turned into Russian "*Western Union – самый быстрый способ перевести деньги по всему миру*".

The cited translation can hardly be considered correct and efficient, as it evokes in the reader's mind two idioms of the target language, both parallels being far from advantageous. Firstly, the expression *перевести (деньги)* has the meaning *to squander (money) away*. Secondly, the final part of the translated slogan can be associated with the idiom *пустить по миру* (to cause one loose everything). The poor translation thus turns advertisement into something quite contrary.

A similar transformation has been registered by B. Kaufman, author of the famous novel *Up the Down Staircase*, its title having turned in one of translations into *Вверх ногами по лестнице* (lit. *Upside Down on the Staircase*), which, according to the author, contributed new meaning to the novel itself (Kaufman 2005).

It is worth mentioning that such an effect of unplanned, unexpected idiomaticity may arise not only in translations, but in original utterances as well. Thus, V. Zhirinovskiy opened his 2011 election campaign with the poster featuring the following text: *Я не считаю ваши голоса. Я их слышу* (literally: *I don't count your voices, I hear them*). When compressed, it turns into *Жириновский слышит голоса*, which is the same as to say that *Zhirinovskiy is insane*.

Conclusion

Summing up the above discussion we would like to once again emphasize the following:

Firstly, despite decades of research there yet remains the niche for untranslatability, idioms being on the verge of it.

Secondly, with all the extensive study in the field of phraseology, it is only the nucleus of the problem that has been duly analyzed, while a number of adjacent problems are yet waiting for their share of attention.

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«Невидимый идиот» в переводе, или Внимание, фразеологизм!

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Настоящая статья посвящена рассмотрению фразеологизмов как переводческой трудности, фактору «культурной непереводимости». Проблема перевода фразеологизмов ставилась многими теоретиками перевода, однако они затрагивали лишь фразеологизмы в их канонической форме, не касаясь таких более частных моментов, как звуко-символические и трансформированные фразеологизмы. В статье ставится комплекс вопросов, связанных с переводом фразеологии, возникающих как на начальной стадии процесса перевода, так и на конечной, т.е. на входе и на выходе.

Ключевые слова: фразеологизм; перевод; этос; культурная (не)переводимость; звуко-символизм; дефразеологизация.
