

Culture-Specific Items in the Translation of Parenting Books

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Abstract

Every culture and/or community has its own practices, values and principles used in raising and educating children. Despite a few standards of care which have universal validity, parenting is significantly culturally determined. Consequently, the difficulty of translating parenting materials resides precisely in the challenge to accurately render the cultural manifestations of parenting practices from one language into another. The translator needs to be aware that in the case of parenting books, s/he should consider the fact that s/he is translating between cultures just as s/he is translating between languages. This paper studies the Romanian translation of a well-known American parenting book from the perspective of the manipulation of culture-specific items.

Keywords

translation, interference, parenting, culturemes, translation strategies

1. Introduction

In the last decade, the shelves of Romanian bookstores have started to display an impressive amount of parenting literature. It is an unprecedented success of this nonfiction category, which has been triggered by a shift in parenting patterns assisted by the abundance of information on how to raise and educate children.

The general genre of parenting books is further subdivided into other several categories. One is dedicated to baby care, another addresses the care and education of older children and teenagers; some focus on the emotional aspect of child care, others teach parents how to deal with tantrums and so on.

Since parenting, with all its implications, is such a complex issue which involves and impacts the life of parents and children alike at so many distinct levels, it is only natural that it does not conform to a universal standard which applies all over the world. Parenting materials - and books in particular, since they are the focus of this paper – are a relevant illustration of the habits, beliefs, principles and values of child breeding in a given culture and/or community. Therefore, despite the fact that the content of parenting books has a huge

intercultural relevance, such books are, at the same time, the space where cultural differences are extremely visible.

Such cultural differences become even more visible when the books are translated, particularly as texts are not only translated from one language into another, but also from one culture into another. It should be noted that the case of parenting books illustrates very well the concept of literary interference advanced by Even Zohar. According to the Israeli scholar, interference “can be defined as a relation(ship) between literatures, whereby a certain literature A (a source literature) may become a source of direct or indirect loans for another literature B (a target literature)” (1990, 54). He also claims that such interference may be unilateral (one-way influence) or bilateral (when the interacting systems influence each other), and that it is possible either through direct contact (when the target readers know the source language and have unmediated access to resources in the SL) or through mediation, the most obvious forms of which is translation.

Most parenting books that are available on the Romania market are translated from English, which makes it the main source language in this form of interaction, interference in this case being unilateral (in fact, Even Zohar states that “there is no symmetry in literary interference”, *ibid.*, 65).

The broader context of the translation deserves some consideration, since it may influence the translation process per se. Therefore, it is important to identify the moment, the objective and the initiators of a given translation or a broader translation project, but also the source languages/cultures selected. In Romania, the interest manifested in parenting materials sprang from a shift in the mentality and approach to parenting of newer generations of parents, who, in a way, drifted away from the models of parenting inherited from their parents. This change of mentality was inspired by Anglo-American models. The resources were mainly accessed by Romanian parents and child psychologists alike through direct contact, given that newer generations of parents - drivers of this change - have a sufficient level of English language knowledge that allows them to extract information directly from the source language.

Therefore, the main purpose of this larger domestic project of translation was to fill up a void. Identifying the growing interest of this category of readers towards the topic, publishing houses - the initiators of the translations – have launched such resources in Romanian translation, in order to make them accessible to a wider readership. According to Even Zohar, one of the conditions of interference between literatures occurs when the receiving system lacks an item which is available elsewhere and which it may access through transfer: “A ‘need’ may arise when a new generation feels that the norms governing the system are no longer effective and therefore must be replaced. If the domestic repertoire does not offer any options in this direction, while an accessible adjacent system seems to

possess them, interference will very likely take place” (1990, 69). In this particular case, the “need”, to use Even Zohar’s term, was the refreshment and renewal of a pattern of parenting which was felt as no longer reflecting and supporting the current realities and trends in child breeding and education.

As mentioned above, the main source language is English. We resort again to the tenants of the Israeli scholar, who claims that the source literature is selected based on its prestige and dominance, which are ensured mostly by its cultural power and relevance. In our situation, the most prolific authors in the field belong to the British and American cultures and, obviously, these are the ones predominantly selected for translation. Moreover, given that at some point target readers already may have already accessed parenting resources in the source language, they are allegedly familiar with names of reputed specialists in the field such as Dr. Spock or Alfie Kohn.

Therefore, the translation of this genre of nonfiction can be deemed the agent of change, the process which actually ensured it a place in the Romanian literary system. Given the scarce number of Romanian authors in the field, we may claim that the translation of parenting books from English could not only satisfy a need, but also create the setting for and encourage the production of similar resources in the local language as well.

2. Setting the background of the analysis

The book that makes the object of this analysis is *What to Expect: The First Year*® signed by Heidi Murkoff and Sharon Mazel. Murkoff is also the author of the celebrated *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, which was actually the title from which an entire series ensued and which also comprises the book *What to Expect: The Second Year*.

What to Expect® is now a trademark, with a huge public success and which is well-known all over the world. Although the first book has not been translated into Romanian yet, I was commissioned by a publishing house to translate the second title of the series, *What to Expect: The First Year*. In the United States, this book is already at its third edition and has sold in over 11 million copies. Advertised as “every parent’s must-have/go-to”, it is expected to register a similar success on the Romanian market. Consequently, the motivation upon which the initiator, i.e. the publishing house, based its decision was the position occupied by this book in its category within the American literary system.

Parenting books are usually considered a subdivision of the category of psychology literature. However, books that address baby care are usually included in the category of medicine, since the advice and recommendations they contain focus mainly on the physical care of the baby, with potential medical concerns for

parents, although they also contain hints for the stimulation of the baby's emotional and social development. Practically the nature of the information contained in a book on baby care makes it a mixed sub-genre, which combines psychology with medicine. Although the psychology jargon does not have a very high level of complexity, one cannot claim the same about medical terminology, which implies that the translator must have at least some level of medical knowledge or expertise in the translation of medical documents.

As can be expected, the medical discourse in these books is not highly specialized, since it addresses readers (parents, grandparents, caregivers etc.) with potentially limited familiarity with this field. This implies that the translator must find the same adequate register and level of specialization in the target language, in order to make the information accessible to as wide a readership as possible.

WEFY is such a combination of psychology and medicine, which makes it a challenging task for the translator. But there is an additional challenge which falls under the category of register. In order to make the resource both accessible and fun for parents, the authors opted for an informal discourse, more reader friendly, but more difficult to accommodate in a higher context culture such as the Romanian one. As a conclusion to these preliminary observations to the analysis of the translation itself, we might say that this particular parenting book raises a number of translating problems at a double level: linguistic and cultural.

3. The source text/culture in translation

As purported by one of the initiators of the cultural turn in translation studies, Susan Bassnett (1990), translation is a process which does not only take place at a linguistic level, but at a cultural level as well. It involves transfers both from one linguistic code into another and from one cultural system into another. In this new light of translation, the translator is required to be not only bilingual but, equally important, bi-cultural which means being well aware of the specific values, traits, norms and conventions of both interacting cultures.

The objective of authors of parenting books and baby care resources in particular is usually to present and/or prescribe a set of practices and habits that are used in the community of the target readers they have in view. There is rarely any baby care resource aimed at an international readership; apart from baby care basics which, medically speaking, are quite universal, there are many variations which indicate local variability in this field of child care (e.g. the issue of circumcision, the introduction of solids, house proofing for safety purposes, regulations for the use of baby car seats, etc.).

Basically, the translator does not only render content in the target language, but also introduces concepts which are alien in the target culture. This means that, particularly when approaching the translation process from the perspective of cultural transfer, the issue of culturemes is unavoidable. In Aixela's terms, culturemes or culture-specific items (CSI) are "usually expressed in a text by means of objects and of systems of classification and measurement whose use is

restricted to the source culture, or by means of the transcription of opinions and the description of habits equally alien to the receiving culture” (1996, 56). Therefore, CSIs do not only refer to concrete items or objects, but also to culturally determined norms or thinking systems specific to a given culture/community.

WEFY abounds in such culturemes, which indicates that the authors wrote the book for an American public, already familiar with the various references of local relevance. A distinct problem with the translation of CSIs is that, although a given concept may exist in the target culture, in the TC it may have a distinct value or function than it fulfils in the SC. There are CSIs which are so deeply-embedded in the source culture (institutions, everyday use items), that they would be quite irrelevant for the target readership and would better be left off in translation. However, they may be retained by the translator for information purposes, i.e. to instruct target readers on the existence of structures, rules and/or ideas which, although not present in the target culture, might benefit it if they were. In other words, their retention in the target text, although seemingly irrelevant for the comprehension of the main idea of the text, may serve an educational purpose by broadening the cultural horizon of the target readers. In a way, it is a means to indicate how other people do the same things and in the process the very nature of translation is thus served, that is that there is no single and absolute perspective on reality, but several, all of which could be equally valid. However, the decision to preserve or delete such culturemes altogether does not belong to the translator, but to the publishing house, in keeping with the policy it has on the translation of culturally specific references.

3.1 Systems of measurement

One of the most frequently met issues that confront a translator who renders a text from English into Romanian refers to units of measurement. Given that the book was written in America, it uses the U.S. customary units. The standard practice of translation into Romanian in the case of measurement units is to convert them into metric units. This ensures the accessibility of the information presented to the readers. A text which, being a translation into Romanian, preserves any units of measurements which are not metric is felt as unnatural and not reader-friendly. Obviously, there is a debate over the accuracy of the conversion and what is lost through conversion, but, if the text does not require a very high level of accuracy as is the case with physics, mathematics or pharmacy, the translator may specify the converted values either by adding “approximately” or by indicating an interval of the values (e.g. 5-6 cm).

In *WEFY*, the units of measurement most frequently used are pounds, ounces, inches and Fahrenheit, all of which need to be converted into the metric system. Whereas the translator may interfere with the text in the meaning of converting the units in order to make them sound natural to Romanian readers, the culturally determined significance of the values remains unmediated, the translator being in this case a mere agent of transfer. For instance, the author indicates that the optimal temperature for the bathing room is 24-26C, whereas a Romanian puericulture book would indicate around 22-24C.

3.2 References without equivalent in the TC

These represent a real touchstone for translators, mainly when they refer to concrete items which are inexistent in the target culture. In our particular case, this is not due to an extremely large cultural gap between the Romanian and the American cultures, but more precisely to the fact that the latter has a faster pace of implementing developments and innovations in the field under study. After all, a source text is selected for translation particularly for the role it may play as an agent of change and innovation in the target system.

Usually, if there is no equivalent concept/item in the receiving culture, translators may opt for one of the following strategies or may even combine them, depending on the relevance of the respective CSI for the text and the amplitude of the intercultural gap between the interacting systems. One would be deletion, when the reference is completely removed from the context, another would be explication, when the foreign reference is replaced in the target text with a longer structure explaining what that reference actually is, while another may be simply non translation, when the term is repeated as such in the source text, possibly followed by an explication in between brackets the first time it appears. Usually, this last strategy makes use of typographic means as well, since the foreignness of the source term is marked by italics.

There are not many such examples to be found in *WEFY*. One category refers to subdivisions of professional categories. In a subchapter dedicated to the help a new mother might need with the baby and/or domestic chores, the authors mention baby nurses and doulas, whom you may hire part- or full-time. Although there are baby nurses in the Romanian medical system, they are employed by hospitals and not by individual persons. As for a doula, the concept is extremely new in Romania. The term is used as such as it appears mostly in online materials, on blogs etc. It can be retained in Romanian with the English variant, only marked typographically - *doula*. The same category comprises terms such as “nanny” and “baby sitter”, which connote different things in English, but which have a single term in Romanian, namely *bonă* (in Romanian there is also the term *doică*, but nowadays it is felt as archaic).

Another terminological problem which reveals a conceptual gap is reflected by the category of nurses existing in the American medical system, but without any counterpart in the Romanian one. Thus, Merhoff mentions *pediatric nurse practitioners (PNP)* – “the equivalent of the nurse-midwife in the obstetrician’s office” (22) and *pediatric physician’s assistants (PA)* – “who work under the supervision of a physician, spend 2 years training at an accredited program after completing college)” (*idem*). Although in the Romanian medical system we do have the concept of *moaşă*, who must complete medical studies in order to be able and work in the system, there is no equivalent to the American PA, since paediatricians work with nurses who usually have additional training courses in paediatrics. As it is, in our opinion in this latter case explication as a translation strategy would be the most adequate solution, as the idea is to inform Romanian readers on the existence of this category of nurses and not necessarily to provide them with an exact term for the job.

Another category refers to items of baby clothing and diapers. For instance, in order to swaddle a baby, an American mom has at her disposal swaddling blankets, swaddlers with Velcro or zip-up pods. As for diapers, especially reusable ones, the many types that are available on the American market would confuse a Romanian parent: flats and prefolds, contoured, fitted, all-in-ones (AIOs), pocket diapers and all-in-twos. In all these cases, it would be even useless to try and find an equivalent term for each such category, explicitation being, again, the most appropriate translation strategy in this context.

Due to the many different aspects associated with baby care which are tackled in the book, the authors mention various institutions, associations and organizations which are known by American readers, but of whose existence the Romanian readership is completely unaware. In these cases, if the proper noun in point does not designate a globally known institution or organisation such as the World Health Organisation or the Food and Drug Agency, I translated the entire noun phrase, without attempting to substitute it with a Romanian similar institution or organisation. It is the case of the National New Born Screening & Genetics Resource Center (NNSGRC) or the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Since, when repeated, most such proper names are used in the source text with their acronym, I followed the same strategy.

3.4 Lullabies and nursery rhymes

Each chapter dedicated to the physical care of infants also addresses issues related to their mental and emotional development, with suggestions for age-appropriate range of toys and activities. In order to introduce older babies to activities such as counting or to help them acquire the concept of the permanence of objects, the authors recommend parents to resort to songs and nursery rhymes.

Obviously, they illustrate with songs such as “Baa, baa, black sheep”, “Itsy Bitsy Spider” or “One, two, buckle my shoe”. However famous they may be among the newer generations of Romanian parents due to the accessibility of such songs on the Internet, in order to assist Romanian readers in relating to the text more closely, the most appropriate strategy in this case was naturalisation. According to Dimitriu, naturalisation “implies the replacement of a source text culture-specific item by a target text culture-specific item” (2002, 74). Thus, I chose to replace them with Romanian songs used to teach numbers such as “Cifrele” or “Eu am zece degetele”. The purpose of using this strategy was to bring the source text closer to its target readers and encourage them to look for resources in their own native tongue.

4. Conclusions

Although parenting materials may not seem a very challenging task for translation seen from the outside, there are some issues that have to be addressed with particular care. As already mentioned above, one of the challenges in the translation of this class of nonfiction writing is the fact that parenting books represent a mixed genre that combines medicine and psychology, which forces the translator to juggle constantly with two sets of specialized language. Another area

which requires the translator's careful consideration refers to culturally specific items, which cover a wide range of concepts, from everyday use items to institutions and professions. Finally, there is the register issue. Although register is not necessarily a translation problem in the case of parenting books (in which the tone is mostly intended to be very professional and neutral), in the particular case of *WEFY*, the translation was also expected to preserve the light and friendly tone of the source text while making it acceptable to Romanian readers, more accustomed to a more formal register that usually governs the literature on parenting.

In terms of translation strategies, the translator's choice reveals his/her aim to bridge the gap between the two interacting cultures. This goal can be achieved either by emphasizing the difference between the two cultures, in which case the translation has a foreignizing orientation, or by acclimatizing the source text to what is acceptable in the target culture, in which case the translation has a domesticating orientation. However, the larger the distance between the two cultures involved in translation (such distance may not only be geographic, but also ideological), the more difficult it is to reconcile the differences without resorting to foreignizing translating strategies.

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