

THE CULTURAL COMPONENT OF LITERARY TRANSLATIONS:

"With her new *yukata* on, she left her *geta* in the *genkan*, opened the *shôji* and went in to sit under the *kotatsu*".

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Abstract

It is generally considered that, especially in the case of culturally distant translations, cultural elements that are present in the source text cannot be completely and accurately conveyed into the target text. This paper aims to present several translation techniques that could help preserving cultural information through translation, and to discuss each one's advantages and disadvantages. Examples are given from published Romanian translations of Japanese literary works.

Keywords: faithfulness, cultural component, adaptation, compensation, explication

1. INTRODUCTION

Faithfulness in translation includes several components and has been long debated. While early criticism revolves around the idea that the accurate translation of a content into another language and culture is an impossible task², newer approaches start giving greater attention to the cultural component, thus making an important step towards improving the faithfulness of translations. It is now generally considered that "anything that can be said in one language can be said in another"³, but, if the two languages and cultures involved (such as, for instance, Japanese and Romanian) show significant dissimilarities, the translation process is more difficult and complex. While the statement of the renowned Japanologist E. Seidensticker,

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² See, for instance, Wilhelm von Humboldt, in his letter to A. W. Schlegel (1796): "All translation seems to me simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible. [...] Despite the fact that translation brings cultures nearer, in each translation, there will be a definite deformation between cultures."

³ Nida & Taber (1982:4).

that “a total and exact literal translation of a text from an Eastern language, such as Japanese, into the linguistic structures of a Western language, is impossible”⁴, may be somewhat exaggerated, it seems reasonable to accept that at least some cultural aspects may be lost in the process of translation, due to the translator’s (lack of) abilities but also to the limited knowledge of the target readers. If a literary translator does not have, besides a profound acquaintance with the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of a foreign language, a comprehensive knowledge of the *culture* that produced the work, he may fail to recognize some cultural elements and thus he may be unable to faithfully convey them into the target text. On the other hand, a reader that has limited or no knowledge about the source culture⁵ is less likely to be able to create an exact mental representation of the information (faithfully) conveyed by the translation.

For these reasons, the main issue that cultural translations must solve is to respect the source culture and show the cultural differences in a text, in a manner that is easily understandable to the target readers and does not diminish the literary qualities of the source text. In order to achieve faithfulness in the case of culturally distant translations, the translator must clarify concepts to compensate for the inevitable cultural asymmetries and, at times, make adaptations, bring innovations or use any forms of re-creation whenever the element referred to in the original text does not exist in the culture of the target text⁶.

2. JAPANESE CULTURAL ELEMENTS

If we consider culture in its broad sense, as a complex encompassing a range of phenomena that have been transmitted through social learning, over a considerable period of time, in human societies, including knowledge, values, beliefs, customs, social practices, as well as material expressions such as technology, art etc., then the range of elements that may be called “cultural” is very wide. To give only a few and disparate examples, Japanese cultural elements that may be difficult to convey to a foreign public could belong to one of the following categories:

– **cultural elements from the historical past:** such as noble titles and various civil, court or military ranks (*shōgun*, *daimyō*, *batamoto* etc.), the Japanese historical periods (*Genroku*, *Man’en*, *Taishō* etc.), historical provinces (*Ōmi*, *Echizen*, *Izumo*, *Bizen* etc.)

⁴ Seidenticker (1989).

⁵ Sometimes basic *visual* knowledge (acquired from TV documentaries, movies etc. or personal experience) is crucial for creating a correct mental representation of the content, as many very common objects present in the everyday life, such as bread or trains, may differ from the target culture to the source culture – as we will further discuss in Section 2.

⁶ Baker (2001).

– **general cultural elements:** such as literary works, dialects, writing systems, beliefs (the mischievous *kitsune* and *tanuki*; *rokuyō*, the 6 kinds of auspicious or inauspicious days of the traditional calendar), etiquette, ritual exchanges, codes of conduct (*shochū mimai* etc.), formulaic expressions (*okagesama de, itadakimasu* etc.)

– **facts of everyday life** – such as family bathing customs, beginning of the fiscal/academic year in April, using the personal seal instead of name signing, food (*chawan mushi*), clothing (*yukata, monpe, hakama, zōri* etc.), elements of modern reality (*tsūkin densha, manga, anime, kosupure, ganguro, yankī, bōkaroido* etc.)

Of course, the **degree of familiarity** of the target audience with the elements of the source culture may vary: while *kimono, samurai, geisha, shōgun* are Japanese cultural specific elements that are nowadays known worldwide, while *sushi, tempura, wasabi, kaki, shiitake* are found on many continents, and *manga* or *anime* are loved by young people everywhere and therefore explanations or translations of the terms may no longer be necessary, *o-mikoshi, monpe, or buppan* are most certainly not known to the average reader.

The translator must also keep in mind the fact that even if, for some concepts belonging to the source culture, a linguistic equivalent seems to exist in the target language and culture, this equivalent may in fact convey a slightly different reality and thus create an inaccurate image in the mind of the reader. Two very simple examples are (*tsūkin*) *densha* – ‘(commuter) train’ and *pan* – ‘bread’. For most Romanians, the word ‘train’ refers to the railroad vehicles used to travel from one city to another, as in Romania commuter trains circulating within a city, similar to the JR trains in Tokyo, are inexistent. Similarly, for Romanian readers, the word ‘bread’ normally evokes the oblong or round bread *loaf*, and not the square-shaped, 6- or 8-sliced bread sealed in a plastic bag, so familiar in Japan. In these cases, the translator must find ways to compensate for the cultural gap, by adding explanations about the concept translated, without compromising the naturalness and style of the original text. For (*tsūkin*) *densha* for instance, a simple solution would be to use the syntagm ‘tren urban’ (‘urban train’), which is understandable for the Romanian readers, even if not widespread.

3. TRANSLATING STRATEGIES

When faced with cultural elements, the translator may apply different strategies in order to convey their meaning in the target text. In this section, we will discuss those that are most frequently seen in published Romanian translations of Japanese literary works.

3.1 NO TRANSLATION

Leaving a Japanese specific term untranslated, for stylistic reasons, may work only in the case of widely known concepts that have long entered the target culture and ideally are also present in the language dictionaries of the target language, such as *sake*, *kimono* or *sushi*⁷.

Less known terms, if left untranslated, may fail to convey their meaning. Such an example as (1) (created for illustration purposes, hopefully never to be seen in a published translation), while creating some kind of specific Japanese atmosphere, would not be entirely comprehensible to the readers, even if they could infer from the context that *yukata* is a type of garment or hat, that *genkan* refers to a space, and that *shōji* is some kind of access point to an inner space.

(1) With her new *yukata* on, she left her *geta* in the *genkan*, opened the *shōji* and went in to sit under the *kotatsu*.

3.2 FOOTNOTES

Leaving the term untranslated in the text and explaining it in a footnote, at its first mention, is a useful strategy especially when that term will continue to appear throughout the text, and is frequently seen in Romanian translations.

(2) La masa de seară bunicul a mâncat *norimaki*⁸.

Interestingly enough, in this example *norimaki* is explained in the footnote as “*sushi* rolled in dried pressed algae strips”, but the term *sushi* did not appear and hence was not explained, in its turn, earlier in the book – a proof that the translator and/or the editor considered that the word is already well known by the Romanian readers.

One problem arises when there are many unfamiliar Japanese terms close in the text, such as in example (3). Giving footnotes for all of them (instead of, for example, explaining them within the text) preserves the rhythm of the story, but at the same time interrupts the flow of reading, as the reader must leave the text and consult the notes at the bottom of the page.

(3) Utajima⁹ este o insulă mică, a cărei circumferință nu depășește un *ri*¹⁰, și are o mie patru sute de locuitori. [...] Dacă urci cele două sute de trepte de piatră spre

⁷ For the word *sushi*, see the explanation of the footnote of example (2) below.

⁸ 1. *Sushi* rulat în fâșii de alge uscate și presate. (Kawabata – *Jurnal de la șaisprezece ani* p. 13)

templu și privești înapoi, de lângă poarta *tori-i*¹¹ străjuită de cei doi lei din piatră – paznicii templului –, înaintea ochilor ți se deschide întinderea golfului, neschimbată de trecerea secolelor.

In the case of large literary works, very dense in cultural specific elements such as historical terms etc., a glossary following the translation would be perhaps the best solution instead of footnotes or other explanatory strategies.

3.3 JAPANESE TERM + EXPLANATION WITHIN THE TEXT

Another current translation strategy leaves the Japanese term in the text and adds a short explanation in the target language.

- (4) a. păstăile *edamame* – “*edamame* pods” (Kawakami – *Vreme ciudată la Tokio* p. 27)
- b. ciuperci *matsutake* – “*matsutake* mushrooms” (Kawakami – *Vreme ciudată la Tokio* p. 27)
- c. ridiche *daikon* – “*daikon* radish” (Mishima – *Tumultul valurilor*, p. 21)
- d. carte cu *manga*, benzi desenate – “*manga* comic strips” (Mishima – *Tumultul valurilor*, p. 21)

This strategy helps maintaining the flow of reading, as opposed to footnotes. Also, if the explanatory word represents a hypernym of the Japanese term, the naturalness of the text is preserved even for those readers who may have some cultural knowledge and may understand the Japanese term. In other cases, however, when the Japanese term and the explanatory term in the target language have exactly the same meaning, they might be felt somewhat redundant, such as in example (5):

- (5) a. camera de ceai *chashitsu* – “the *chashitsu* tea room”
 - b. bolul de ceai *chawan* – “the *chawan* tea bowl”
- (Inoue – *Maestrul de ceai*, p. 10)

3.4 DEFINITION WITHOUT THE JAPANESE TERM

Another translation technique is finding the equivalent in the target language of the original Japanese term, without leaving the Japanese term in the text. It may simplify the reading process and prevent the reader from meeting yet another

⁹ „Insula Cântecului”.

¹⁰ Unitate de lungime tradițională japoneză, reprezentând aproximativ 3,9 km.

¹¹ Poartă înălțată la intrarea în incinta unui templu șintoist, în general vopsită în portocaliu aprins, compusă din doi stâlpi groși înclinați spre interior, care susțin orizontal o grindă arcuită cu capetele ridicate. (Mishima – *Tumultul valurilor*, p. 5-6)

unfamiliar word, but at the same time it de-culturalizes a cultural word and some of the original atmosphere is lost.

(6) Dacă urci cele două sute de trepte de piatră spre templu și privești înapoi, de lângă poarta *tori-i*³ străjuită de cei doi lei din piatră – paznicii templului –, înaintea ochilor ți se deschide întinderea golfului, neschimbată de trecerea secolelor.

(Mishima – *Tumultul valurilor*, p. 6)

In this particular example, the original Japanese term was *karajishi*, a type of *shishi*, the legendary lion-like creature. In order to avoid too many footnotes on the same page (see example (3) above), the translator chose to replace the Japanese word with an explanatory segment, “the two stone lions, guardians of the temple”.

(7) Bătrânul și-a întins marfa la umbra stâncilor. [...] Erau acolo chimonouri de vară din bumbac, îmbrăcămințe ușoară, hăinuțe pentru copii, brâuri pentru chimonouri, șireturi pentru împodobit brăurile, cămăși, lenjerie...

(Mishima – *Tumultul valurilor*, p. 146)

In the paragraph of example (7), the Japanese specific terms are related to clothing – *yukata*, *hitoeobi* (one-layer sash) and *obijime* (sash string). In the Romanian version, they are all explained rather than translated: *yukata* becomes a “summer cotton kimono¹²”, *hitoeobi*, “sashes for kimonos”, and *obijime*, “decorative strings for sashes”.

3.5 ADAPTATIONS

A particular kind of translation strategy, less used and more demanding, involves adapting the Japanese specific elements to the cultural context that is familiar to the target readers, sometimes with the risk of losing the cultural content in the process, and/or of adding too much of the target culture to the original text.

(8) — Acestea sunt sărățele Soka¹³ și *nori* de Asakusa, a zis patronul, arătând spre pungile de hârtie.

¹² Note that the term used in the translation, “kimono”, obviously derived from the Japanese word *kimono*, has long been used in the Romanian language. It already has a spelling adapted to the Romanian orthography and appears in the language dictionaries.

¹³ Una dintre cele mai populare mărci de sărățele din orez din Japonia. Sunt obținute prin coacere, au formă rotundă și sunt crocante.

(Kawakami – *Vreme ciudată la Tokio* p. 43)

In this example, the Japanese specific term in question is *Sōka senbei*. *Senbei* is translated with the Romanian word “sărățele” – salty crackers, and thus adapted to the Romanian reality, but the Romanian traditional salty crackers are very different from the Japanese *senbei* and they certainly evoke a very different image in the mind of the Romanian reader. Probably for this reason, the translator chooses to also add a footnote, giving explanations not only about the *Sōka* brand, but also about the making of the Japanese traditional *senbei*.

The following example, taken from Haruki Murakami's short story *Yesterday*, is more complex. One of the main characters of the story, Kitaru, speaks in the Kansai dialect:

- (9) a. 昨日は / あしたのおとといで / おとといのあしたや
 b. 「木棺というのは珍しい名前だよね」と僕は言った。
 「ああ、そやな、かなり珍しいやろ」と木棺は言った。
 「ロッセに同じ名前のピッチャーがいた」
 「ああ、あれな、うちとは関係ないねん。あんまりない名前やから、まあどっかでちょこっと繋がってるのかもしれないけどな」

The Romanian translator chooses to transform all instances of the Kansai dialect into the Romanian northern (Moldavian) dialect, as shown below. The idea is interesting, but unfortunately, because of the density of dialectal instances throughout the text, and probably also due to the fact that the Romanian readers are not accustomed to decipher the Moldavian dialect *in writing*, the result is rather heavy and difficult to follow:

- (9') a. Nu știu să mai fi existat, în afară de Kitaru, cineva care să scornească versuri în japoneză (și încă în dialect!) la cântecul “Yesterday” al Beatlesilor.
 Ieri / Alaltăieriu' lu' mâini / Îi mâinili lu' alaltăieeeri
 (Murakami – *Bărbați fără femei* p. 37)
 b. — E neobișnuit numele Kitaru, i-am zis.
 — Da, așa-i. Îi distul di neobișnuit, a spus.
 — În echipa Lotte era un jucător cu numele ăsta.
 — Aa, n-am niși o treabă cu dânsul. Sau, mă rog, fiindcă-i un numi așa di rar poati cî o fi vreo legătură îndepărtată.
 (Murakami – *Bărbați fără femei* p. 38)

In contrast, the English translation only mentions the Kansai dialect, but the character's utterances, though in the colloquial style, do not show any conspicuous dialectal marks:

(9") a. As far as I know, the only person ever to put Japanese lyrics to the Beatles song "Yesterday" (and to do so in the distinctive Kansai dialect, no less) was a guy named Kitaru. He used to belt out his own version when he was taking a bath.

Yesterday / Is two days before tomorrow, / The day after two days ago.

b. "Kitaru is an unusual last name," I said one day.

"Yeah, for sure," Kitaru replied in his heavy Kansai accent.

"The Lotte baseball team had a pitcher with the same name."

"The two of us aren't related. Not so common a name, though, so who knows? Maybe there's a connection somewhere."

CONCLUSIONS

In his aim to achieve faithfulness in the case of culturally distant translations, the translator has several strategies at hand, which he can use to clarify concepts and to compensate for the inevitable cultural asymmetries. If the context allows it, he can also attempt to make adaptations or use any forms of re-creation whenever the element referred to in the original text does not exist in the culture of the target text, but all strategies should be applied in a harmonious way, so that the literary qualities of the source text are not diminished and, simultaneously, the naturalness of the target language in the translation is preserved.

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