

Translating Expressive Language: Some Socio-Cultural Insights

Katarina Gjurchevska Atanasovska, PhD

Sonja Kitanovska-Kimovska, PhD

Abstract

Expressive lexical units are culturally bound and deeply rooted into socio-cultural contexts; their connotative dimension accentuates their implicit meaning dependent on extralinguistic factors which are related to cultural notions and ways of using them within a society. The purpose of this paper is to show that contrastively analysing expressive language in translation can shed light on some interesting insights into socio-cultural similarities and differences between English and Macedonian with regard to certain types of expressive language. The results of the survey confirm that differences in socio-cultural and historical conditions have differently affected the ways in which concepts and notions are perceived in these languages, leading to differences in the use of expressive words and their metaphorical dimension in both languages and posing challenges to translators.

Keywords: language, culture, translation, society, expressive language

Introduction

In the context of various sociological and anthropological researches aiming at illuminating culture and its implications on different aspects of human life, linguists have been among the first scientists to perceive the close relationship between language and culture. Snell-Hornby (1995: 40) mentions Humboldt as one of the first linguists who perfectly understood that culture, language and behavior are interdependent. He understands language as an expression of culture and individuality of the speaker, who perceives the world through the language. Jones (1999: 24-25) makes reference to Sapir and Whorf, who gave impetus to the theory according to which there are culturally based ways of speaking and languages of different cultures create distinct systems of representation which might not always be equivalent; a language encodes certain aspects of reality and influences the thought processes of its speakers.

Speaking of translation as a process which is primarily based on language, the inseparable connection between language and culture indicates that it is furthermore reflected on translation. According to Schaffner and Wiesemann (2001: 14), the first insights into the connection between translation and culture were initiated by the advent of the functionalist approach to translation, according to which “texts are produced and received with a specific purpose, or function in mind; translation is not only, or exclusively, a linguistic activity, but rather a purposeful activity, embedded in and contributing to other purposeful activities“. In the late 1970s, Vermeer (1989 in Venuti, 2000: 221-232) initiated the Skopos theory, according to which translation is a specific kind of communicative action and its purpose is its most decisive criterion. A translation is information offered in a TL¹ culture about information offered in SL² and culture. Since language and culture are interdependent, translation is transfer between cultures.

These standpoints will pave the way for what is today known as the cultural turn of translation studies in the 1980s. Snell-Hornby (2006: 48-49) maintains that this trend actually laid the foundations of a new paradigm for the study of literary translation, according to

which translation has been related to some new key terms such as descriptive, target-oriented and functional. Consequently, it was not the linguistic features of the source text that were dominant when it came to translation, but rather the function of the translation in the target culture.

Expressive language and its socio-cultural dimension in relation to translation

According to Ристић (2004), expressive language³ is one of the language aspects which clearly show the interconnection between language, culture and society since it is culturally bound and deeply rooted into socio-cultural contexts. Expressive language is a rather broad term which may be related to various linguistic units conveying emotional, expressive⁴ and emphasising nuances such as admiration, disapproval, irony etc. Expressive words such as slang, idioms, vulgarisms, taboos, dysphemisms, offensive words, diminutives and hypocorisms, interjections and onomatopoeic words⁵ have additional meanings providing the speaker with the possibility of expressing his/her thoughts in accordance with his/her attitudes and emotions.

In spite of different definitions and classifications, the most important feature that these words share is their connotative aspect. Ристић (2004) explains that this component, which is characterized by expressiveness, emotionality, evaluation and imagery⁶, is part of their lexical meaning which supplements its basic, denotative meaning and it is through the connotative meaning that most of their sociological and psychological associations are reflected as well as the speaker's attitude towards what is being communicated. Бояджиев (2002: 263-264) explains that "while denotation denominates, connotation evaluates concepts and actions. This evaluative nuance is the core of connotation, which contributes to the expressiveness of these words and their stylistic markedness". Furthermore, Ристић (2004: 22-23) adds that connotation can be perceived from a pragmatic aspect, meaning that it is related to cultural notions and traditions as well as to other extralinguistic factors.

This paper aims at showing that contrastively analysing expressive language in translation can reveal some interesting insights into socio-cultural similarities and differences between English and Macedonian with regard to certain types of expressive language. The results of the survey will be used to confirm that different socio-cultural and historical conditions influence the ways in which concepts and notions are perceived in these languages, leading to differences in the use of expressive words and their metaphorical aspect and posing challenges to translators.

Corpus and methodology

The corpus from which the examples are excerpted consists of two short stories collections, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love"⁷ by Raymond Carver and "The Most Beautiful Woman in Town"⁸ by Charles Bukowski written in English and its Macedonian translations⁹.

252 examples of different types of expressive language from the originals were compared to their Macedonian translations. Having in mind the text typology of Katharina Reiss and her functionalist approach to translation¹⁰, it was analyzed whether the translators were able to provide functionally equivalent translations for the expressive language from the

originals, ensuring the same stylistic effect on the reader through choosing appropriate forms in Macedonian.

The contrastive analysis of the examples included detecting translation procedures used and evaluating the stylistic effectiveness of translation equivalents within the translation methodology applied to form-oriented texts. Special attention was paid to the translation equivalents which were found to be unsuccessful by not conveying the connotative nuance of the original expressive words, which is crucial for a form-oriented text. The effects of the unsuccessful translations on the overall translation quality were studied and alternative translation equivalents were offered with a view to providing better results and effect on the reader.

For the purpose of contrastively analysing the examples from the corpus, various dictionaries and encyclopedia in English were used in order to define the expressive words and to reveal their connotative, often implicit meanings (Cambridge Dictionary of Idioms, Collins English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang, The Free Dictionary and Thesaurus Online, Urban Dictionary etc.). Several Macedonian dictionaries were consulted as well (Македонска фразеологија со мал фразеолошки речник, Дигитален речник на македонскиот јазик, Англиско-македонски речник на идиоми, Македонско-англиски речник на идиоми, Речник на жаргонски зборови и изрази). However, it has to be noted that searching for Macedonian equivalents with appropriate stylistic effect was more difficult and challenging, having in mind the lack of specialized dictionaries in Macedonian. Therefore, in order to obtain as relevant results as possible, a questionnaire was administered among 3rd and 4th year students of translation at the Translation and Interpreting Department within Blazhe Koneski Faculty of Philology in Skopje. They were supposed to provide expressive synonyms in Macedonian for different concepts that expressive lexical units from the originals refer to. The findings and the conclusions are based on the examples drawn from the corpus, as well as from the dictionaries and the questionnaire.

Findings and discussion

In addition to tackling the issues which translators may face when working with strongly connotative and socio-culturally infused language, the analysis of the examples gave some very interesting insights into certain socio-cultural similarities and differences between English and Macedonian with regard to certain types of expressive language.

Slang meaning “drunk” or “under the influence” – The analysis shows that both English and Macedonian abound with slang words meaning *drunk*. When it comes to English, dictionaries give exhaustive lists of words with this meaning:

- (1) loaded canned flying stoned wrecked soaked lit up trashed
merry tight tipsy well-oiled bombed boozed up tanked wasted

Macedonian language also has a variety of colourful expressions with the same meaning:

- (1a) мортус дупка ѓон дрво гајда летва леш под гас тапа
 сом кутук кор губре флекосан цуцосан

It can be noticed that some of these expressions in Macedonian and in English show analogy when it comes to their metaphorical aspect (stoned – камен, wasted – губре). Furthermore, the semantics of both Macedonian and English words indicates that there is an evident gradation with regard to the quality expressed (↓merry – tipsy – loaded – stoned – ↑wrecked, ↓под гас – гајда – летва – камен – ↑кор). The difference is that English words display a greater variety of different gradation nuances related to the meaning *drunk*, whereas Macedonian words focus on the high degree of the quality they describe.

This could be put down to similar traditions and social practices connected with the consumption of alcohol in both cultures. It is a common phenomenon in both cultures; however, excessive consumption of alcohol is considered to be socially unacceptable in both cases. This situation influenced the way in which drunkenness is perceived in both societies and it is manifested in both languages through a variety of expressive words, most of which are extremely colourful and create vivid associations in language users.

Ethnic slurs – The analysis shows that Macedonian and English manifest certain differences in relation to ethnic slurs. For example, in the English version of the short stories there are pejorative words for the French (2) and for the Americans (2a). Furthermore, English shows a considerable variety of pejorative expressions denoting members of different races, especially the black (2b):

- (2) Frenchy frog foggy

- (2a) gringo

- (2b) negro nigger coloured spade spaerchucker coon ape monkey
 thick lips crow niglet spook

The gap which exists between English and Macedonian related to ethnic slurs comes as a result of different socio-cultural and historical backgrounds in both cultures. Macedonian is also rich in ethnic slurs, but they refer to different nationalities from the ones used in English. This situation can be put down to the fact that in recent history Macedonia never faced such an intensive interaction between so many different people as it is the case with the melting pot of the American society. In Macedonian there are ethnic slurs for people and ethnicities with which Macedonians came into contact or live in everyday life. However, this situation is gradually being changed by the inevitable process of globalization. Consequently, in Macedonian there are pejorative expressions used for black people (2c), but English is far richer and more creative in this regard:

- (2c) црнчуга црнчиште црња кумбе ноќ

These words mirror the way in which certain people are accepted in the society and create possibilities to further develop their metaphorical aspect by creating new concepts, meanings and usages (Циган – a dishonest man).

Offensive words and expressions referring to people with homosexual orientation – English is very rich in offensive expressions referring to males with homosexual orientation:

(3) fag faggot pansy queer bent batty boy nancy poof fairy

On the other hand, Macedonian is not as diverse as English when it comes to these words; the analysis shows that they do exist, but are far fewer in number:

(3a) педер пешко буљаш двоцевка обратен

This could be put down to different socio-cultural trends and ways of understanding different phenomena in both cultures. The American society, perhaps being more dynamic and open-minded, has probably expressed openness to these issues earlier in time. However, although this society advocates sexual freedom and tolerance towards these people, it does not mean that they are widely accepted by the entire society. This has resulted in numerous offensive words and expressions denoting people with homosexual orientation in English. Having in mind the socio-cultural context in the Balkans and the traditional aspect of the Balkan societies, the awareness of and openness to trends like these are relatively recent and exotic, which may be the reason why there are fewer such words in Macedonian.

Dysphemisms emphasising inferiority or imperfection – Since almost every culture disapproves of unacceptable behaviour and negative phenomena or characteristics, English and Macedonian overlap in this regard. In English, there are numerous words denoting a person which is considered to be inapt or in any other way inferior to others:

(4) fucker motherfucker fart dumbbell dolt fool clod born fool
loser goof bonehead jerk sucker birdbrain

Macedonian is also rich in words and expressions evoking similar associations:

(4a) глуперда дебил кретен ретарда глупак дудук ашлак
токмак курајбер лингур морон овчар стока суртук

Speaking of dysphemisms denoting inferiority or a moral or physical imperfection, Macedonian and English tend to overlap when it comes to the figurative dimension these words have. For example, in English many such words denotatively refer to certain animals, but when used connotatively they acquire new meanings by accentuating negative characteristics or flaws:

(5) bat cow turkey monkey swine beast bitch leech

Macedonian language shares the same tendency and some words have the same metaphorical charge like their English counterparts. This similarity could be regarded as a result of universal concepts and associations about animals and their imperfections.

(5a) крава овца гуска мајмун свиња кучка свер пијавица

Vulgarisms referring to genitals, body effluvia and the sexual act – Having in mind that perhaps every culture considers vulgarisms referring to genitals, body effluvia and the sexual act as a taboo, this is another area where Macedonian and English show similarities. For example, in English there is a huge number of vulgarisms referring to penis (6) and to the sexual act (7):

(6) cock dick pecker knob chopper tool string

(7) fuck screw bang shag hump shaft poke lay roger

Macedonian is also rich in words like these and some of them have the same figurative charge as their English counterparts:

(6a) кур курац алат стојко патлак мандало

(7a) ебе дупи работи се онади се кова се опне се

Swears – As these words reflect states of affect common for every culture, the analysis indicates that swears are frequent in both English (8) and Macedonian (8a). It is difficult to measure which language is richer in this regard as both of them have exhaustive lists of swears.

(8) to hell with what the hell (holly) shit fuck (it) fuck you God damn it
up your mother's bunghole

(8a) носи се гони се у курац у пичку матер пичка ти мајчина еби се
да ти ебам срање да му се сневиди

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the strong connotative dimension of expressive words, which emphasises their implicit meaning conditional on extralinguistic factors, culture and traditions as well as on practical usage of certain concepts in a society, it can be seen that differences in socio-cultural and historical background of Macedonian and English influenced the ways in which concepts and notions are understood as well as the metaphorical aspect and usage of expressive language. This contributes to similarities and differences between Macedonian and English in regards to certain types of expressive language.

The analysis indicates that Macedonian and English show similarities regarding slang meaning *drunk*, dysphemisms emphasising inferiority or imperfection, vulgarisms referring to genitals, body effluvia and the sexual act and swears, whereas they differentiate when it comes to offensive words and expressions referring to people with homosexual orientation and ethnic slurs.

These insights prove that culture, traditions, social trends and experiences affect the creation and the usage of expressive language; they are closely connected to these aspects.

The cultural dimension of expressive language is vital because it is contained in the connotative meaning, which is their crucial component.

In regard to translation, the cultural aspect of expressive language is essential; their complex connotative meaning can be very challenging for translators. Connotation should be properly conveyed in translation. If overlooked, expressive language loses its power and creative charge. Especially challenging are those situations in which translators face cultural gaps between the source and the target language because this can lead to differences in the ways in which expressive words are used in different languages. In such cases, their task would be to bridge those cultural gaps, which can be quite a challenge.

Notes:

¹ TL stands for target language

² SL stands for source language

³ There are various types of expressive linguistic units, such as onomatopoeic words, interjections, grammar constructions, elliptical constructions etc. However, for the purpose of this research, this paper uses the concept of expressive language to refer to expressive lexical units only, without taking into consideration other types of expressive linguistic units.

⁴ As it is claimed by Бояджиев (2002: 264), expressiveness can be broadly defined as semantic and stylistic features of language units accentuating their distinctiveness and stressing the intensity of what is being communicated. For further information on expressiveness, see Чаркић (2002: 24).

⁵ There are numerous classifications of expressive lexical units. Some authors like Leech (1990), Dickins, Hervey and Higgins (2013) and Finegan (2004) focus on their connotative aspect and meaning, while others like Минова-Ѓуркова (2003) and Бояджиев (2002) tend to approach them from a semantic or stylistic point of view. For the purpose of this paper, expressive lexical units are classified according to their semantic and stylistic aspects related to the extralinguistic context they usually appear in and their socio-cultural dimension. For more detailed information on different types of expressive words and their most important specificities see Ѓурчевска Атанасовска, Катарина (2018: 42-49).

⁶ For further information on the most important characteristics of connotation, see Ристић (2004: 18-23).

⁷ Carver, Raymond. 2009. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. London: Vintage Books, 2009

⁸ Bukowski, Charles. 2008. *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town and Other Stories*. London: Virgin Books Ltd, 2008

⁹ Карвер, Рејмонд. 1990. *За што зборуваме кога зборуваме за љубовта*. Скопје, Култура; Буковски, Ч. (2009), *Најубавата жена во градот и други раскази*. Скопје: Икона, 1990

¹⁰ For more information on text typology of Katharina Reiss and different translation methods that she offers for different text types see Reiss, Katharina. 2000. *Translation Criticism – the Potentials and Limitations. Categories and Criteria for Translation Quality Assessment* (translated by Erroll F. Rhodes). Manchester & New York St. Jerome Publishing & American Bible Society, 2000

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Katarina Gjurgevska Atanasovska, PhD
Associate professor
Translation and Interpreting Department
Blazhe Koneski Faculty of Philology, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
9A Gotse Delchev Boulevard, 1000 Skopje
katarina.gjurgevska.atanasovska@flf.ukim.edu.mk

Sonja Kitanovska-Kimovska,
Associate professor
Translation and Interpreting Department
Blazhe Koneski Faculty of Philology, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
9A Gotse Delchev Boulevard, 1000 Skopje
e-mail: sonjakitanovska@flf.ukim.edu.mk

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