Translating the World: Differences and Common Core in Culturally-Determined Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Content vocabulary may have different connotative values and different denotational meanings in different languages according to cultural idiosyncracy, manifested in culture-specific "key" meanings and culture-related scripts. Our claim here is that, even in all these cases involving the use of background knowledge with culturally-determined differences in different languages, there is still room for transfer of a core meaning, which makes translation possible and allows transcultural communication. This fact is illustrated by examining some words related to the term 'freedom' in English which are claimed not to be equivalent across languages.

1. Introduction

This article will deal with encyclopedic knowledge of a certain kind, strongly linked to culture, and its implications in translation. With that goal in mind, we will start by providing a simple example of what can be considered to be a mistranslation. Let us have a look at this translation that a commercially-available program[1] made of a short literary fragment (Isabel Allende. *Cuentos de Eva Luna*. Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 1992: 177).

Source (Spanish):

Hay toda clase de historias. Algunas nacen al ser contadas, su substancia es el lenguaje y antes de que alguien las ponga en palabras son apenas una emoción, un capricho de la mente, una

imagen o una intangible reminiscencia: Otras vienen completas, como manzanas, pueden repetirse hasta el infinito sin riesgo de alterar su sentido. Existen unas tomadas de la realidad y procesadas por la inspiración, mientras que otras nacen de un instante de inspiración y se convierten en realidad al ser contadas. Y hay historias secretas que permanecen ocultas en las sombras de la memoria, son como organismos vivos, les salen raíces, tentáculos, se llenan de adherencias y parásitos y con el tiempo se transforman en materia de pesadillas. A veces para exorcizar los demonios de un recuerdo es necesario contarlo como un cuento.

Translation (English):

> There is all class of histories. Some are born to the counted being, their substance is the language and before that somebody puts them in words they are hardly an emotion, a whim of the mind, an image or an intangible reminiscence: Another they come complete, like apples, they could repeat until the infinite without risk of altering their sense. They exist some taken of the reality and processed by the inspiration, while another they are born of an instant of inspiration and they are converted in reality to the counted being. And there are secret histories that remain occult in the shades of the memory, they are like live organisms, roots, tentacles, leave them are filled of [adherencias] and parasites and they with the time transform in material of nightmares. Sometimes for [exorcizar] the demons of a memory are necessary count it like a story.

In this translation we can see several kinds of problems, which appear underlined. Some of them are cases of ambiguity, which the program has mistranslated. This is what happens with *to the counted being*, which should have been *to be told*. The program's complete lack of understanding of what the text is about has produced this awkward expression. Other mistakes, although more grammatical, are also due to semantic blindness. This is the case with the indefinite article *the*, which appears too often. In English, this article has a more restricted use than in Spanish and should not be translated in all cases. Something similar happens with the pronoun *they*, also present in the expression *another they*, which is used instead of *others*. Other mistakes show limitations in the lexicon of the program, which cannot properly translate certain collocations (using *converted in* instead of *converted into*, *with the time* instead of *in time*, and even a "word-for-word" literal translation: *transform in material of nightmares*). There are also two words for which there is no translation in the program lexicon, with the result that the translation gives up and keeps them within brackets ("adherencias" and "exorcizar").

A right and true translation should have been something like the following:

> There are all kinds of stories. Some are born to be told, their substance is language and, before somebody puts them into words, they are hardly an emotion, a whim of the mind, an image or an intangible reminiscence: Others come complete, like apples; they can be repeated endlessly without the risk of altering their sense. Some exist taken from reality and are processed by inspiration, while others are born in an instant of inspiration and are converted into realities to be told. And there are secret stories that remain occult in the shades of memory, they are like live organisms, grow roots, tentacles, are covered with adherences and parasites and, in time,

are transformed into material for nightmares. Sometimes, in order to exorcize the demons of a memory it is necessary to tell it as a story.

The point to be made here is whatever the linguistic phenomena that may be involved in a wrong translation, in most cases we can solve the problems that turn up by referring to vocabulary, as we have done above. We know for sure that there are different levels in linguistic analysis, and all of them are relevant. We have the phonological (or graphic) level, the morphological level, the syntax level, the semantics level, the pragmatics level… but all of them are reflected in vocabulary, because a word is a distinct unit which can be easily distinguished and has a high degree of correlation with many linguistic phenomena in all the above-mentioned levels. Reference will be made here as to how vocabulary deals with world or encyclopedic knowledge, which is information of a semantico-pragmatic nature.

2. Vocabulary and meaning

If we examine the semantics of a word, we will find a large conceptual complex with two faces: one dynamic, the other static. Vocabulary can be used either to structure and organize discourse or to express information content. Both functions may be accomplished by the same item, but most generally the former is carried out by what has been called *schematic vocabulary* and the latter, by the so-called *procedural vocabulary* (cf. Widdowson, 1983, Robinson, 1988). This distinction is related to the opposition between *formal schemata* (structure-based knowledge structures) and *content schemata* (content-based knowledge structures), commonly referred to in schemata theory (Rumelhart, 1980, Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977). Similarly, words can also be considered to be knowledge structures of their own, which encapsulate two basic kinds of information: *Declarative* (about factual knowledge) and *procedural* (about procedures), in a manner similar to the two types of information that we find in Anderson's (1983) psychological model of natural language processing (*ACT*), where working memory is helped by both declarative and production memory in order to produce language. There is another perspective, too. Langacker (1987: 163), a cognitive linguist, talks about "cognitive routines" that are activated when using vocabulary. Lexical units are points of access to a large network, in which we store knowledge about the world. The very psychological complexity of the network can be seen in phenomena of cognitive import like prototypicality effects (that is, effects based on the fact that categories do not have either clear boundaries or perfect instances but, rather, approximations with different degrees of centrality or marginality within the category) (Rosch, 1975).

The above-mentioned two-fold quality of vocabulary and the complex network that lies behind every word explains its encyclopedic nature (cf. Peeters 2000), part of which has to do with culture. This can be seen, for instance, in cultural "lexical" scripts. In lexical scripts (cf. Inchaurralde, 1997) we can see how certain vocabulary items are linked to whole sequences of actions that constitute events of relevance to a certain culture. These cultural

signalling lexical units can also be applied by means of metaphorical mappings to completely new situations, as can be seen, for instance, with words and expressions in Spanish related to bull-fighting ('salir al ruedo', 'vestirse de luces', 'torear algo', 'dar la puntilla', etc.). These expressions have a strong cultural component, since only those familiar with the language of bullfighting can interpret them in an adequate way, and bullfighting is an activity that is strongly linked to a large number of Spanish-speakers around the world. Similar examples can be found in expressions taken from cricket in British English, such as 'you're out', or from martial arts and sumo in Japanese. This possibility may pose huge problems for the translator. When the meaning of lexical units is linked to cultural lexical scripts, we may have either a coincidence of all the members of a certain cultural context within which that script works well with the total population that speaks a given language, or a cultural-context coverage of only a part of that population. In the latter case, it is possible to find speakers of the language that do not understand certain cultural lexical scripts. However, in both cases, translation should try to account for the cultural references implied by the lexical unit. Achieving this is difficult, and the meaning may be lost when we choose to use an "equivalence" in the target language (e.g., 'bull-fighter' in English for Spanish 'matador'), unless we make a paraphrase telling more. In these cases, when we choose to keep the original lexical unit in the translation (e.g., to use 'matador' in English), then it is assumed that the meaning has a strong cultural "flavour"; but, in any case, a paraphrase may be useful, since we need to make the reader familiar with the context from which the unit has been taken.

However, culture may also show itself in the vocabulary in a completely different way. Wierzbicka (1997, 1998) points out how certain concepts linked to culture are best expressed by terms of the language normally used in that cultural context. Even terms which apparently have an easy cross-cultural translation seem to have meanings which are influenced by cultural values. In fact, there are many lexical units in different languages that have a difficult match, and there are whole lexical areas which are organized differently. These differences can be shown through various word frequencies for the translated terms and various degrees of "cultural elaboration"; but, Wierzbicka goes beyond and emphasizes the concept of "key words" (cf. Evans-Pritchard, 1968; Williams, 1976; Parkin, 1982, Moeran, 1989), that is, "words which are particularly important and revealing in a given culture" (Wierzbicka, 1997: 15-16). This author mentions, for instance, how the concept of 'friendship' -as we know it- has different terms, with different meanings, in different languages. The meaning of the lexical unit 'friend' has changed in English in the course of time, and she explores this change by examining different expressions that we use nowadays ('bosom friends', 'to make friends', 'true friends' vs. 'close friends', 'dear friends' vs. 'enjoyable friends', etc.). However, the differences are even clearer with respect to the different conceptions of 'friendship' in Russian (expressed in terms like 'drug', 'podruga', 'prijatel', 'tovarisc' or 'rodnye'), in Polish (with terms like 'koledzy', 'kolezanki', 'przyjaciel', 'znajomi' or 'rodzina'), or even in Australian English with the term 'mate' (Wierzbicka, 1997: 55-117). When we examine terms from a language of a non-Western culture and try to translate them into English, the lexical distance gets even more

conspicuous. This happens with Japanese, for instance. Wierzbicka (1997: 235-278) also examines vocabulary from this language and concludes that lexical units, such as 'amae', 'enryo', 'wa', 'on', 'giri', 'seishin', 'omoiyari', etc. have a difficult, if not impossible, translation into English, and this imposes a strong dependence on context when trying to choose a suitable translation. In any case, the translation will not reflect the real meaning, since culturally-dependent notions require cultural experience and understanding, which the audience from another language do not have. When there is a strong coincidence between the use of the language and cultural values, as it is the case with the examples Wierzbicka mentions for Japanese, the solution is difficult and, normally, the original lexical unit in the source language is preserved in the target language.

In addition, vocabulary items are also used to express evaluation by means of their connotative value. In fact, Osgood (1976) proved that evaluation itself is a very important factor in the connotative value of many words. Moreover, the author of any text can use vocabulary in such a way that it helps transmit a certain ideology and certain values. This can be accomplished by means of assigning certain behaviour and situational structures by means of explicit reference to facts, ideas or simply values to concrete lexical units (e.g., words referring to political tendencies, such as 'communist', 'socialist', or 'conservative' can be assigned by different groups of speakers to different behaviour categories), which then get 'loaded' with meaning. Marked ideological language involves evaluation, either positive or negative, and an ideological domain to which we can refer. Ideological domains may be different in different languages, since they depend heavily on cultural context, especially as regards politics, religion, social groups, etc. It may be the case that lexical units with a clear and very straightforward translation may lose their original ideological connotation as concerns their equivalence in the target language. This happens even with plain connotative values in terms of the opposition positive-negative. The word 'sofisticado' in Spanish has a pejorative value, with the value of 'too complex', 'too complicated', 'adulterated', or 'unnatural' (showing affectation), which its equivalent in English, 'sophisticated', does not have. In this case, it is difficult to translate the connotative value if it does not exist in the target language due to cultural reasons.

To the complex problem of the differences in the encoding of different cultural concepts in two separate languages, we should add the problem of different levels of expertise in concrete knowledge domains in the same language or in two separate languages, or the so-called distinction between "folk categories" and "expert categories" (cf. Taylor, 1989: 72). This distinction has to do with Putnam's notion of the division of labour within a speech community (1975). Ordinary speakers identify objects in the world by means of "stereotypes", which rely on our knowledge of perceptual and interactional attributes of certain instances. At the same time, there are bodies of experts in the same speech community for whom the same objects or notions are defined in a more scientific, expert way. We have the well-known example of the term 'whale' in folk biological taxonomies versus 'whale' in a scientific biological taxonomy. A whale may be thought of as a kind of 'fish' in a popular taxonomy, whereas it is always a mammal in biology. This is an extreme case, because everybody nowadays is aware of its 'mammal' status in a scientific taxonomy;

but, it may still be considered as a fish in idioms and in some popular uses of the term (for fishermen, it may be something similar to a fish; and so, it must be conceptualized as such). The issue is more relevant for the use of certain terms in specialized domains, since it may be the case that language users are unaware of the specialized meaning unless explicitly told about it. The importance of accurate language in science and in law (among other disciplines) gives a prominent role to definitions. In science, any discussion needs clear definition of the terms used. Otherwise, scientists may end up discussing different things.

3. The need for a common core. The example of 'Freedom'

All of these elements -culture, connotation and ideological values, as well as domain specificity- contribute to the considerable richness of vocabulary meaning, which makes things more complicated to translators. However, the fact that there exist differences in these aspects across languages does not necessarily imply that there should be unsurmountable problems in translation. In spite of all the differences, there will always be a "common core", which is amenable to translation, and we can illustrate this by commenting on some of the culture-specific vocabulary analyses carried out by Anna Wierzbicka (1997).

There are two English words which clearly have a subtle cultural "flavour", so to speak; these are *freedom* and *liberty*. We all know what freedom means, and we assume that the meaning is very similar in the corresponding translations to other languages. However, Wierzbicka (1997: chapter 3) has shown, in a very convincing manner, that *freedom* is a concept with different meanings in different languages, according to cultural motivations. Wierzbicka defines different possibilities for *freedom* and *liberty*, by using a metalanguage with the semantic primitives she has identified after having studied a wide variety of languages in the world (cf. Wierzbicka, 1996). The definitions she gives are the following:

freedom   [freedom^2]
(a) someone (X) can think something like this:
(b) if I want to do something I can do it
(c) no one else can say to me: "you can't do it because I don't want this"
(d) if I don't want to do something I don't have to do it
(e) no one else can say to me: "you have to do it because I want this"
(f) this is good for X
(g) it is bad if someone cannot think this

freedom (older)   [freedom^1]
(a) someone (X) can think something like this:
(b) if I want to do something I can do it
(c) I don't have to think: I can't do it

liberty [liberty^2]
(a) everyone can think something like this:
(b) if I want to do something because I think it is good I can do it
(c) no one can say: "this person can't do it because I don't want this"
(d) everyone thinks: this is good

liberty (older) [liberty^1]
(a) someone (X) can think something like this:
(b) if I want to do something I can do it
(c) I don't have to think:
(d) someone can say: "I don't want this"
(e) I can't do it because of this

Her argument is that these words have idiosyncratic definitions which they do not share with others that are normally used as their translation equivalents in other languages. She explicitly mentions *libertas* (with several meanings) in Latin, the Russian *svoboda* and *volja* (two meanings), and *wolnosc* in Polish. However, in contrast with what she claims, there seems to be in fact a core meaning of *freedom*, which is shared with the other terms, although with different semantic restrictions. Wierzbicka is not very enthusiastic in her writings about assigning a fuzzy structure to meaning, with different levels of prototypicality for the different members of a category (cf. Taylor, 1989). Notwithstanding this fact, she builds definitions by showing a core meaning and, around it, different marginal members of the concept.

Let us see this with the running examples of *freedom* and *liberty*. According to the above definitions, there is something in common, a pivotal definition, which is the following:

FREEDOM
(a) someone (X) can think something like this:
(b) If I want to do something I can do it.

Of all the different definitions that Wierzbicka (1997:154-155) gives of more or less equivalent words for four languages, there is only another possibility, which is found in the Latin *libertas* and the Polish *wolnosc*, which is:

LIBERTAS
(a) someone (X) can think something like this.
(b) when I do something I do it because I want to do it

which still contains the same predicates (*to do something*, and *to want to do something*), but in reverse order. Thus, the difference is only in emphasis on one or the other direction of the causal chain.

Let us, therefore, take the two-line definition for FREEDOM, and we still have different possibilities for extension, which characterizes the different meanings in the different terms. *Freedom¹* (the older freedom) only adds

(c) I don't have to think: I can't do it

Freedom² arises out of *freedom¹* by means of a double transformation in the analytical structure of its definition, and (b) has now two possibilities: not only can I do something if I want to, but I can also choose not to do something if I don't want to. Accordingly, there is the possibility of nobody being able to say that no one has forced the decision:

(b) if I want to do something I can do it
(c) no one else can say to me: "you can't do it because I don't want this"
(d) if I don't want to do something I don't have to do it
(e) no one else can say to me: "you have to do it because I want this"

An evaluative component is also added:

(f) this is good for X
(g) it is bad if someone cannot think this

It is important to notice that this definition is an extension from the previous one. The concept is more elaborated, but it is not incompatible.

Something similar can be said of *liberty*. It starts with the basic two-line definition, and adds three more lines, in which complete independence from what others think is stated:

(c) I don't have to think:
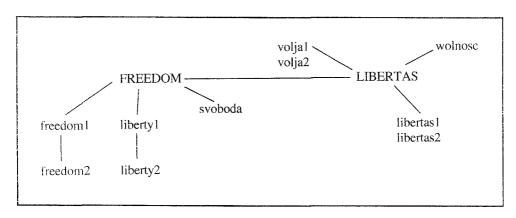(d) someone can say: "I don't want this"
(e) I can't do it because of this

The historical transformation into *liberty²* is more complex than with *freedom²*. (a) and (b) accomodate not "someone" but "everyone". Complete independence from others' thoughts in (c)-(e) above changes into complete impossibility of others' thoughts against the free action:

(c) no one can say: "this person can't do it because I don't want this"

And here again, there is now evaluation:

(d) everyone thinks: this is good

Wierzbicka writes these definitions by drawing on linguistic evidence of a shift in meanings, especially regarding the kinds of constructions in which these words can appear. However, with a completely analytical procedure, we can see the direction the shift has taken. From more dependence to more independence of others' opinions, and towards a concept of FREEDOM positively evaluated. We can then posit that there has been a progressive restriction of meaning, which at the same time groups all these senses by means of a "family resemblance". Paradoxically, Wierzbicka's refusal to talk in terms of more prototypical members vs.more marginal members of a given category cannot be understood, since these terms can be grouped according to different degrees of prototypicality. And what is more interesting is the fact that we can do the same with the other terms from other languages that she presents. A more useful way of looking at how this group of terms is structured is by considering them as a multilingual radial network, which shows some hierarchical relationship among the definitions of the different words involved:

As we can see, we may agree with the fact that "freedom" and "liberty" are two terms which cannot be equated with similar terms in other languages. This is very important for translation, since it is necessary to provide additional contextual information about what is different in the meaning of the word and what is similar. But the important fact here is that these words are related and their semantic structure can be connected, no matter how far they are from one another in the radial network.

4. Conclusion

This is a very simple example of how vocabulary can be connected beyond language and beyond semantic shifts to form a structured whole. Wierzbicka is right when she states that different words which are supposed to mean the same are different and that difference is strongly conditioned by culture, but a relationship holds; this is, therefore, the reason why

a translator can always find a term in the target language even if it is not precise enough. Differences in meaning across languages can then be expressed by paraphrase, qualifying adjectives or other means.

We have seen here how content vocabulary may have different connotative values and different denotational meanings in different languages according to cultural idiosyncracy, manifested in both culture-specific "key" meanings and culture-related scripts. To some extent there is also the possibility to have differences in terms of expertise related to a specific sublanguage. But in all these cases, it is wise to assume that there should be something in common across terms in distant languages that makes translation possible, i.e., a common core in vocabulary whereby transcultural communication can be achieved.

Notes

1. MicroTac Software's Spanish Assistant for Macintosh, version 1.0.

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