

Relevance of the Cultural Transfer in Translation: False-friends in Media Sources

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Abstract: In continuation of a trend which started in the early 1990s, various areas of information tend to adopt – and much less adapt – foreign terminology for various purposes. At present, written and online media tend to use foreign terms more than any other field and thereby expose users to a wide range of new words. In spite of the fact that, in most cases, Romanian has terms corresponding to those from English sources, which can act as appropriate equivalents in economic, financial, social, cultural and media texts, Romanian contributors prefer to “borrow” English words. In some instances, however, these prove to be inappropriately used, due to their characteristics as “deceptive cognates” – in other words, false-friends. The present article focuses on them from a linguistic and cultural point of view.

Key words: information, mistranslation, media, translation skills

1. Introduction

Languages are lively corpuses that keep changing in time, through the adoption or adaptation of new terms, as well as a result of the cultural interrelation with other languages and cultures. The need for new terms and specialised terminologies has constantly increased in the 3rd millennium, as a result of the development of new technologies and of the theoretical and humanistic areas supporting them.

Communication has become equally important and, as such, the media hold a major role in handling and sharing information; this status has turned all modern

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tools of mass communication (at first only newspapers, magazines and radio stations, then the TV channels, video production companies and – last but not least, the internet) into cultural models for large audiences.

Nevertheless, in spite of any potentially good intentions, the temptation of promoting fake news has been a fact, throughout this period of development of the media. Although it is not the immediate purpose of this study, the fact that there continues to be a thin line between fact and fantasy, between truth and alternative readings of specific events, between honesty and bias continues to be an acknowledged fact today. Only in recent years regulating authorities and commissions, both in Europe and in the US have started to carefully assess and expose authors or media corporations who are willingly spreading false information, while also holding them liable for it.

The processing, selection and translation of the information flux is extremely important if journalists are to avoid cultural gaps and an inappropriate rendering of the initial message and of the actual message reception from the source text. One major source of errors is the category of deceptive cognates – also widely known as false-friends – which, when used, risk to render a completely different understanding of words and ideas initially presented. Deceptive cognates are a real trap for translators and, with English having become a widely used language, it may seem easy to translate. However, achieving the appropriate cultural transfer by still preserving the local syntactic and semantic rules often results in a major challenge.

One of the reasons why deceptive cognates are an important source of translation mistakes in Romanian is the status of English as the language which was most influenced by Latin of all Germanic languages, in Medieval times. Since the arrival of the Normans on British soil, they brought along their language which, in turn, left indelible marks on the development of Modern English. But many of these terms underwent changes in time, thereby departing from their initial (Latin) meaning. On the other hand, in Romance languages they preserved their initial, historic meaning, thus becoming a source of confusion for misinformed readers or translators.

Today only a small number of media corporations use professional translators; in most cases, translations are made by people who *know* English but did not benefit from specialised theoretical training. As a result, the importance of good translations made by professionals has lost part of its bearing on what media channels of all types are issuing on a daily or weekly basis – and, in some cases, such as the internet, as a work in continuous progress. Time and the rapid succession of events often justifies improper or mistaken translations, misused words or even intended manipulation. As a result, the reader, viewer or listener is faced with terms he/she knows little about, which sound familiar but have little to do with the purpose of the original speakers.

The traditional and online media are also a constant source of human and professional models. In recent years, elections all around Europe and in the US, or the Brexit referendum were used by media channels for persuasion and manipulation

purposes. People tend to believe what they see on TV, listen to the radio or read on the internet. They even tend to act being inspired by what they see, read or hear; this is the main reason why translation is, in our opinion, an activity with a high degree of responsibility, one that can influence or change opinions, one that can shape emotions, attitudes and personalities. In more ways than one, the media channels now act as a fourth “power” of the state, along the traditional executive, legislative and judicial ones. At the same time, in this era of globalisation, everybody relies on information which can now be accessed easily and is available even in the remotest corners of the globe. Media channels are also a major source of knowledge and the quickest means of communication among people and peoples. In this complex process, language takes a critical place as a fundamental means of expression and delivery of ideas; as such, if it fails to express the intended message the effects cannot be predicted.

Most European languages, including Romanian, have witnessed an infusion of English words and even their syntax is sometimes affected by this new influence. Like Latin, Italian or French in other historical periods, English is the source of new terminologies in economics, finance, computer technologies and other fields; but the informal and colloquial types of speech are the areas which have suffered most as a result of this influence. It has spiced the way in which people talk or share basic information, to such an extent that some misspelled or mispronounced words have become a rule in everyday speech, and even in writing.

The traditional phases of language enrichment – terms assessment, trial and adaptation according to the rules of local languages – are now ignored. Most people working in the media in non-native English countries often forget that not all their viewers and readers speak English fluently, and that even less are familiarised with its technicalities, or with the specific cultural details which make an information usable and useful for audiences.

2. Deceptive cognates in a nutshell

Also known under the name of false-fiends, deceptive cognates define the category of terms which are misleading if improperly used in another language, due to a certain degree of similarity with common knowledge terms in the target culture. From an etymological point of view, these words (in the source language and the target language respectively) have a common origin.

As mentioned before, erroneous translations from English into Romanian are often justified by the common Latin root of words in both languages, with the exception that the initial meaning is still preserved in Romanian, while in English it suffered various adaptations and meaning shifts in time. Even if, from a linguistic point of view, the erroneous use is an “honest mistake”, readers or listeners are confronted with a major gap between personal expectations and the resulting effect of such a mistake.

But Romanian is not the only language in which such examples of false friends occur frequently. Languages with the same root also fall prey to such mistakes; for instance, some English speakers tend to translate the German verb “bekommen” as “to become”; a speaker of Spanish would also be extremely confused if reprimanded after using “pegar” in Portugal – in his native language, this verb means “to get something”, while in the neighbouring Portugal it means “to hit”. Many similar examples can be added: if someone is “embarrassed” in Britain (that is, feeling uncomfortable), they will never be “embarazada” (meaning “pregnant”) in Spain; “ordinary” (meaning “normal” in English) can never be translated by “ordinar” in Romanian, where the meaning is “vulgar, bad mannered”; if someone asks for a fag in Britain, they will receive a cigarette; in the US it is an abusive, politically incorrect term for “gay”. Finally, you can “assist” (help) someone in a difficult situation, but “a asista” in Romanian actually refers to being a witness to a certain event.

The category of cognates defines linguistic forms “historically derived from the same source as another language/form”, but also “semantically dependent” words from the same family (e.g. a noun and a verb)¹. Since they are misleading in all cases, all those responsible for the translation of various specialised texts must be careful to check their actual meaning. Professional translators have the required training which prevents them from making such mistakes, unlike the mass of everyday speakers who only know English “by ear”. As a result, the number of meanings attached to seemingly easy English terms turns translation into a very complex and challenging task.

At times, all learners of English find it difficult to cope with the obstacle of misleading words that defy their expectations. For today’s generations of translation students, who are exposed to a large variety of misused terms of English origin, training their ability to discern and make the right choice is important. In the case of mass media, deceptive cognates can create even more confusion and may lead to message alteration.

Understanding and avoiding the traps of inappropriate translation is, therefore, equally important for media workers and analysts, as well as for media consumers.

One of the reasons for today’s success and influence of mass media in our lives is the fact that quick and efficient communication is better achieved by the use of the informal, even colloquial language register. Even the official speeches of politicians, or those delivered in international organisations such as the UNO, the European Union tend to go beyond academic requirements and often adopt a more flexible tone. The main reason is that, due to modern technologies (e.g. live transmissions online, on social media or webpages) audiences have grown exponentially and are now covering larger categories of viewers from all social strata. Since the purpose of any

¹ Crystal, D. (2011) *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, p. 104. John Wiley & Sons

communication is to send a clear message to all, it means that using a formal register exclusively would reduce the number of potential viewers or readers to a small élite.

Now, at least in theory, the message is immediately received by all and the effects of any given information are easier to grasp. But this process is constantly under risk, due to media users' tendency to propose a rather sophisticated, "cosmopolitan" language filled with words borrowed from other languages, especially from English. What seemed to be a passing fashion in the 1990s and the beginning of the 3rd millennium is now commonplace for newspaper editors, TV anchors and journalists alike.

Translated false-friends, or deceptive cognates can be found, sometimes even in excess, in all mass media types. Their number tends to increase during live events, when reporters must render information from English or other sources quickly and can no longer check the validity of their translation. Sports channels, for instance, are often criticised for their incorrect rendering of the source language message, and for the failure to distinguish false-fiends in due time.

Here are some common examples:

In English: He is a *consistent* athlete, always *determined* to win.

In Romanian: Este un sportiv *consistent* (instead of "exemplar" or "consecvent") *determinat* (instead of "hotărât") să câștige.

In English: Serena is training daily with her *sparring partner*.

In Romanian: Serena se antrenează zilnic cu *sparingul* (instead of "partener de antrenament") ei.

But the area in which English words or idioms are incorrectly used is much larger, and the following is a list of the most common categories:

- a. Words which suffered an extension or narrowing of meaning, unknown to the speaker or reader in the target culture (e.g. to aggravate, antic, actually, common, eventually, engagement, public, versatile, etc.);
- b. Wrong interpretation of singular vs. plural meaning (geniuses/genii, performance/performances, etc.);
- c. Compound nouns used incorrectly ("man-of-war", "man-of-the-world", etc.)
- d. Incorrect live translations ("you don't want to know" – which actually is not an interdiction, but rather a warning that information may prove unpleasant for the listener, so it better be left unsaid).

Other examples can be found in talk-shows or news bulletins. Another source of mistranslated false-friends are artistic and documentary films, as well as TV series. They are viewed by many people and, therefore, the risk of promoting a perverted type of language is quite high.

Here are some examples:

In English: You must always be focused on your project.

In Romanian: Trebuie să fii mereu *focusat* (instead of „concentrat”) pe proiectul tău.

In English: I realized that it is appropriate to give full support to our friends.

In Romanian: Am realizat că este *apropiat* (instead of „normal, potrivit”) să dăm *suport* (instead of ”să oferim susținere”, ”să susținem”) total prietenilor noștri.

3. Relevance of the cultural background

When first-hand information is presented to readers, listeners or internet audiences adapting the given information becomes critical; the cultural background related to the use of certain words is indeed very important. Leech (1983), Brown & Levinson (1987), Kasper (2009; 2014), Reynolds & Valentine (2011), among others, focus on the importance of observing the required frameworks provided by the level of knowledge of the speakers' cultural background, as well as by politeness norms.

Mass media professionals should be aware that they must use the appropriate strategies, when dealing with language issues related to cultural specificity. The *illocutionary* aspect (related to the context and intended message) along with the *perlocutionary* one (with reference to the effects of the shared message) must also be part of the final translation choice. In practice, it means that the person who is translating a text or oral presentation delivered in a foreign language, including a number of deceptive cognates cannot be aware of the audiences' expectations and neither can he/she predict the effect of the translated variant. When the translation is incorrect, the target audiences are faced with the dilemma of reviewing the information, and then of understanding the real purpose of the utterance.

As a result, achieving an adequate cultural transfer becomes critical; the negative effects of incorrect rendering can be perceived both at the linguistic level (the language performance) and on individual or group behaviour.

Breakdowns in the appropriate cross-cultural communication, in the case of mass media, occur in various situations, among which:

- TV shows and interviews with foreign personalities, where local journalists or their invited guests use a complex language, filled with too many neologisms or newly-coined terms;
- Film and documentary translations, in which a thorough pre-translation documentation is missing;
- Specialised texts from complex areas of interest (IT, finance, economics, pop music, slang words and terms, etc.).

The effects of these gaps of knowledge result in major changes of the target vocabulary corpus and, at time, in a lowering of speech and written standards. Since, more often than not, the use determines the rule, dictionaries are now more open to including inappropriate terms. Relevant recent examples in Romanian are the terms “locație” (instead of *loc de desfășurare*) for the English “location”, by completely

erasing the original meaning of this term, which is “rent”, or “a realiza” as equivalent for “to realise”, thus (almost permanently) replacing the correct translation by “*a-ți da seama*”.

4. Thorough or superficial? Translating for audiences’ benefit

Mass media can also be defined as potential personality influencers; journalists are often perceived as models for wide audiences, both from the point of style and of the language used. Models are there for people to follow, and it is quite important if they act in readers, listeners or viewers’ benefit or ignore this role altogether. This issue has never been approached separately in statistics, possibly because of a general tendency to focus on direct results, thereby underestimating the actual way in which *interaction* is established. Media cannot exist in the absence of direct interaction with audiences – a fact which, since the recent boom of social media (Facebook, Twitter and others) has been sufficiently underlined and confirmed. Therefore, for journalists who also act as translators the responsibility goes beyond the simple presentation of facts, events and information of all types, ideally including greater care paid to live speech acts and simultaneous or consecutive translations.

The general public views media as their own “voice”, opinion or attitude. But the fact that language is a significant part of it is often put aside; journalists’ linguistic ignorance is often ignored and rarely penalized. A superficial approach to topics of interest and to their specific terminology can change to the worse the quality of a language that we all care about.

Language is the mirror of any culture; it defines it, it expresses traditions and ideas specific for that culture, in constant development. It is also the fundamental way of reaching in the depth of emotions, attitudes, opinions that help us understand a culture and communicate efficiently with its members. Correct communication is critical, but it can hardly be achieved if a full understanding of meanings is missing.

In the complex context of 3rd millennium global communication, English remains, for now, the universal language understood by all – more than anything else, a unifying language beyond culture-specific features. People who are responsible for the translation of any type of information – either trained translators or people with a different profession, but with a good knowledge of English – have a great responsibility in preserving the meanings and producing, in the target languages, a message which does not betray the source information.

Individual cultures and languages are also responsible for expanding the vocabulary corpus when needed, but not in the absence of clear norms and rules that do not contradict local syntax and morphology. Excessive linguistic alternatives are, more often than not, a mistake – one that carries a heavy load for the future speakers of any language.

In today’s world no one could live without the information brought to us quickly and efficiently by the traditional and modern mass media. But the way in which future generations will speak depends on the thorough and correct

accumulation of new terms of foreign origin, especially when they resemble local terms and, through a superficial translation, risk replacing the real meaning by incorrect ones.

It is a game with winners and losers, for decades ahead. That is why thorough training must replace the superficial approach to translation.

Translators' work is more appreciated today than ever before; international organisations and various institutions have understood the importance of an appropriate mediation between cultures and languages, the more so in the field of direct communication.

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