COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE BOUNDARIES OF CULTURE: PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING CULTURE SPECIFIC TERMS FROM KAZAKH INTO ENGLISH

Baglan Mizamkhan
Kazakh Ablaikhan University of International Relations & World Languages, Kazakhstan

This paper will examine the peculiarities of translating culture-specific terms from Kazakh into English. It provides different methods of translating cultural connotations, taking into account the ways of living and thinking, as well the historical and cultural backgrounds, embedded in the source language (hereafter SL) and target language (hereafter TL). These methods will be analyzed using specific examples.

Keywords: Source language, Target language, Translation correspondence, Cultural knowledge.

Introduction

At present much attention is paid to comparative studies of languages that belong to different linguistic groups. (Sharipbaev and Bemanova 2009:246) The main aim of such studies is to explore different languages from lexical, semantic, as well as grammatical points of view. In translation, comparative analyses help determine the accuracy and adequacy of the translation. It helps us to discover how human thought is reflected in that particular culture.

Language is an integral part of any culture and is influenced and shaped by it. Language and culture are two phenomena that the translation process must deal with. They are inseparable. Language reflects a culture; it embodies the worldview of a given culture. A translator cannot analyze the language in isolation from it. While translating from one language to another, a translator bridges the gaps between cultures, bringing people from different cultures closer together and helping them share their cultural understandings. Newmark states that “culture is the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression” (1988). Therefore, the translator should bear in mind not only the complexity of translating culture-specific terms; he or she must also pay attention to translatability and to how desirable it is to translate such cultural aspects; have a clear perception of both SL and TL cultures; and be able to solve the problems connected with the untranslatability of specific terms. Otherwise, the lack of cultural knowledge will negatively impact the associative aspects of the given culture, thus causing cultural misunderstanding.

Historical background

The history of translation goes back to the ancient Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, which was characterized by a high level of activity in the field of translation (MorrySofer 2004:19). Since then, translators have been playing the role of mediators between different cultures, bringing
them closer together. Translation has been analyzed from different perspectives and from different points of view since this period.

Translation as an art can be interpreted as either a product or as a process. In this article we will refer to it as both. Toury has stated that “translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions” (2000). It is “the ability to mediate between cultures, to explain one to another; mixed loyalties; the pushes and pulls of the source and target cultures” (Robinson 1997:222).

Ignorance of cultural difference opens a cultural gap that negatively affects the translation process. It is not always possible to be faithful to the original and give an adequate translation. While discussing the problems of translation correspondence and cultural as well as linguistic differences between SL and TL, Nida concludes that the “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure” (2000), because, as mentioned above, each culture has its own specific features. Therefore, while analyzing the translation of example sentences, we will also pay attention to how cultural connotations are rendered into English, and what translation strategies are used to make cultural references more comprehensive.

Source Text

Kazakh and English belong to different language families. Kazakh belongs to a Turkic family which is marked by affixes added to the stem one after another, while English belongs to the Indo-European family known by its VSO (verb subject object) word order. Therefore, these two languages are, in no way, related either structurally or lexically. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyze some translation examples taken from the novels ‘AbaiZholy’ – ‘The Path of Abai,’ by MukhtarAuezov; ‘Koshpendiler’ – ‘The Nomads’ by I Essenberlin, and put forward the cultural and linguistic problems the translators have faced. We do not attempt, in any way, to assess the translation quality.

‘AbaiZholy’ – ‘The Path of Abai’ is a historical novel that was published in 1942. It describes the life of the outstanding Kazakh poet AbaiKunanbaev from his childhood to his senior years. While reading the novel one can feel the entire life of the Kazakh people before the XIX century. It is a novel more full of sorrow and sadness than happiness. It is the sorrow of the Kazakh land and of Kazakh society. Abai’s dream for a happy and better life is the dream of the people.

‘Koshpendiler’ – ‘The Nomads’ is a novel that illustrates the history and ethnography of the Kazakhs. In comparison with ‘The Path of Abai’, the Russian and English versions of ‘The Nomads,’ which forms a trilogy, were severely criticized. The criticism focused primarily on the misinterpretation of culture-specific terms. This failure to make the TL closer to the original was the result of a lack of knowledge of Kazakh culture and of the failure to find appropriate translation strategies to make the novel more readable. On the other hand, none of the translations of either novels say anything about the third language (in this case – Russian) through which the novel was translated into English. It just says “An authorized translation”.

Translation methods

In his “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” Roman Jacobson points out the three main types of translation:
1. Intra-lingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.

2. Inter-lingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.

3. Inter-semiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

Furthermore, Jacobson points out that on the level of inter-lingual translation there is usually no full equivalence between code-units, while messages may serve as adequate interpretations of alien-code units or messages. This is the main type of translation that takes place in translating from one language into another (2000:129).

The main translation type used by translators of these novels was inter-lingual. Alongside this, there were some translation methods that helped the translator make the TL more readable. But before talking about the main translation strategies, we’d like to analyze what makes the TL readable.

Marian B. Labrum (1991) stated that a translation can only be called a translation when the completed translated target-language text:

- Creates the same information
- Creates the same feelings
- Creates the same impressions, and
- Creates the same atmosphere for the new reader, as that experienced by the reader of the original source language text.

Alongside the aforementioned criteria, there are some questions any translator should ask before beginning work:

1. Is the text eligible?
2. Am I familiar enough with the subject to tackle it?
3. Do I have the linguistic resources (dictionaries, human contacts) to decipher unfamiliar words?
4. Is the text complete, or are there any missing parts? (MorrySofer 2004:69)

Only after fully deciding his or her main goals should the translator decide on the main translation strategies. The main strategies used in translating the above mentioned two novels are as follows: transliteration, transcription, explanation, equivalence and omission.

**Linguistic and cultural differences**

According to Belloc H. (1931:32—39), there is no such thing as identical equivalence. The translator should look for the closest equivalence. However, there are two main types of equivalence; one can be called formal, the other - dynamic. Formal equivalence focuses on the message itself, its form and the content.

In the case of formal equivalence, primary attention should be given to the main idea in the target text. In other words, the information in the target text should be as close to the message in the source text as possible. This means that in order to satisfy the criterion of accuracy, the Target culture message needs to be constantly compared to the source culture message. This type of translation, which best satisfies structural equivalence, is called a gloss translation in which the translator tries to reproduce the form and content of the original as closely as possible. Such a transfer would require a set of notes to make the text fully comprehensible.
Dynamic translation, in its turn, aims at complete naturalness of expression. In this case, the recipient is invited to a mode of behavior relevant to the context of his own culture. It is not required that the recipient fully understands the cultural context of the source language.

While discussing the problem of equivalence, both structural and dynamic, we must take into account the three types of correlation which emerge due to linguistic and cultural differences between the codes that transmit messages.

Translation can take place both between related and not-related languages. In cases where the linguistic and cultural differences between the original language and the target language are not great, it is easier for the translator to transfer the meanings; however, even when two cultures are interrelated, if the languages are completely different, the translator has to perform a set of translation transformations.

However, in such cases, the set of matches in the cultures to be compared largely ensures the parallelism of the content, and this makes the translation process less difficult in comparison to non-related languages. Moreover, the differences in cultures cause much more difficulty during the translation than the differences in language structures.

**Problems caused by cultural differences**

More than 30 examples were chosen for the purpose of study. They can be distinguished as exotic terms, as we all know exotic terms are not translatable and have no equivalence in any other languages. This doesn’t mean that translation methods used to render such terms into another language must confuse the readership by giving different variants of one term in one and the same book.

Exotic terms, according to V.S.Vinogradov (1986:97), can be classified in the following way:

1. **Ethnographic:** terms connected with ethnic beliefs and culture
2. **Natural:** Flora and fauna
3. **Historical names for governing and ruling:** military, agricultural, industrial terms
4. **Onomastics:** anthroponyms, toponyms
5. **Associative symbols, allusions**

‘The Nomads’ is a novel full of onomastic terms. In its English translation almost all of the proper names are transliterated, in a few cases they are transcribed. These two terms, transliteration and transcription, might be confusing for non-specialists. In the transcription method the phoneme is marked within the framework of the receptor language (e.g. the transcription of William would be ‘ВИЛЛИЯМ’ or ‘УИЛЛИЯМ’?), and therefore, some non-correspondence may occur.

As regards the transliteration, if necessary, the translator might not fully follow the orthography of the TL, thus, having different variants of a word. A word can have two or three transliterated variants, but not more than three. Both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors are the main reasons to apply this translation strategy.

A proper name a reader encounters more often is ‘ШЫНФЫС ХАН’; it has twelve different graphical forms – all of them are given in one book:

1. Gengiz Khan (4)
2. Gengizkhan (8)
3. Genghiz Khan (9)
4. Genghizkhan (137)
5. Genghiz-khan (190)
6. Chingiskhan (193)
7. Genghis Khan (280)
8. Jenghiz-Khan (287)
9. Chinghiz (294)
10. Genghis-Khan (367)
11. Geghiz-Khan (369)
12. Gengkhis-khan (484)

‘Genghis Khan,’ given on page 280, is registered in the dictionary of D. I. Yermolovich (2000:280). On the other hand, it is the more generally accepted term all over the world. Nevertheless, the name ʻШыңғысʼ in Kazakh should be transliterated as ‘Shynghys’.

Another word full of ‘interesting’ translation variants is the name ʻҚожа Ахмет Яссавиʼ. Hodja Ahmet Yassaui (1096-1166) is the founder of Yasavi Sufism, and a spiritual leader of numerous Muslims throughout the East. He is well-known as ‘The Sultan of the Holy’. Hodja Ahmet determined the direction of the spiritual development of the Turkic peoples in a new Islamic civilization. Combining a new religious ideology with shamanism and Zoroastrianism, he did much to introduce this new religion.

So, the name Hodja Ahmet Yassaui has two variants in Russian:

1. Ходжа-Ахмед-Ясави (45)
2. Ходжа Ахмед Ясави (259), while in the English translation we have eight variants:

1. Sheikh Hoja-Ahmed Yasavi (48)
2. Akhmed-Hoja (131)
3. KhodzhiAkhmedYassav (196)
4. KhadzhiAkhmedYassavi (197)
5. KhodzhiAkhmedYassavi (226)
6. Khoja ahmedYesevi (282)
7. KhodzhiAkhmetYassavi (376)
8. The Saint KhodzhaAkhmet (438).

There is no doubt that proper names should be left untranslated. But ‘Қожа’ is not a name, it is a title given to a person, or more precisely, to those who dealt with the circumcision of Muslim children. Even if there is no equivalent in English, at least the explanation of the title should have been given here. As for the name itself it is transliterated from Russian which explains many things. Taking into account the phonetic peculiarities of these three words and how they are pronounced in Kazakh, we propose the spelling used by the authors of the above article ‘Hodja Ahmet Yassaui’ as the appropriate variant of it.

Another proper name which is not translated correctly, thus confusing the readers, is ‘Жетіқаразыʼ, another name for ‘Уркэр,’ that has several counterparts in English: the Great Bear; Ursa Major; Charles’s Wain; the Wain; and The Dipper depending on the context. Now let us examine, on a simple sentence level, how this name is translated. This analysis will be done not only on the cultural but also on the linguistic level. To show what misinterpretations have taken place during translation we must provide entire sentences in all of these three languages:

Kazakh: Жетіқаразы шөміштене жұрт корғаны ақсакалдар да жиналды.
**Russian:** Одна за другой появились в пожелезневшем небе семь ярких звезд, явственно обозначив ковш. Как только засветились последние из них, с разных сторон на холм стали подниматься атакалы.

**English:** Seven bright stars, one after another, appeared in the dark sky, bringing out a distinct dipper. As soon as the last of them began to shine, the aksakals started to ascend the hill.

**Analysis of the translation:**

1. A grammatical transformation took place: A simple Kazakh sentence was split into two complex sentences in Russian. The same method was followed when it was rendered into English.
2. The verb 'шөмшітену’ in Kazakh means ‘to get together’, ‘to get closer’, ‘to make a circle’. In Russian it is given as a ‘ковш’, which is why it is translated into English as a ‘dipper’.
3. As we have mentioned above Kazakh and English belong to different language families. On the other hand, shifts from one language to another presuppose some structural alterations: omissions or other variations might take place. This doesn’t mean that the sentence structure should be changed totally as in the example sentence given above. Consequently, the sentence meaning was altered completely. Unfortunately, it is not caused by the source-culture knowledge problem, because the sentence has nothing cultural; and equivalents of all the words are available in the TL.
4. After reading the Russian or English translations the reader might think that aksakals, literally “white beards,” or tribal and clan elders (we think that it was correct for the translator to leave this cultural term untranslated), will not emerge until the seventh star appears on the sky! The example sentence could just be translated as: As soon as the Dipper came into view the aksakals, the fortress or stronghold of the people, ascended the hill.

At page 370 of the novel, Жетіқарақиясы is translated into Russian as ‘Семь разбойников – Большая Медведица’; consequently we have ‘Seven Robbers – The Great Bear’ in English!

There are cases in which the translator used transcription methods and left the exotic terms untranslated but with an explanation of the term as a reference. For instance:

**Kazakh:** Байтастың да тянеңн бағына ілген ұзын соыйлы бар-ды.

**English:** ...while Baitas kept a long birch-wood soeel* in place with the tip of his boot.

**Reference**: Soeel – a long pole with a horse-hair loop at the end and used by riders in battle.

Soeel is not translated, but the reference given as a footnote makes the text readable. We think it is one of the most successful strategies chosen by the translator; he chose to leave the exotic term without translation, thus, trying to preserve the national peculiarities of the given culture.

**Conclusion**

Translation is a notion that bears several meanings and definitions. It is an integral part of the culture it is representing. It is something so powerful that it provides access to dead languages and allows us to look back at the history of nations that long ago disappeared from the map. It is the translation that makes different nations closer or that results in severe misunderstandings. Therefore, interpretation of an alien culture depends on how the translator translates the source text, and how he or she interprets the cultural peculiarities of a specific nation.
Translation from Kazakh into English, a translation that involves languages belonging to different language families, demands that the translator knows not only to render culture-specific terms, but the structures of the languages. He or she needs to take into account extra-linguistic factors as well.

References