CULTURAL ASPECT OF TRANSLATING POLITICAL TEXTS

КУЛЬТУРОЛОГІЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ ПЕРЕКЛАДУ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ ТЕКСТІВ

Tokarchuk V.A.,
orcid.org/0000-0003-2993-4205
Ph.D. in Philology,
Senior Lecturer at the Department of English Philology
and Methods of Teaching English
The Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University of Cherkasy

This paper deals with the issues related to the translation of culture-specific units in political texts. Translation of such units can pose problems as it involves understanding messages encoded deeply in the culture of the social community. The translator of a political text should maintain balance between equivalence and adequacy in order to produce a smooth, comprehensible translation which preserves the same messages as the original text carries. Equivalence is commonly understood as the degree of semantic similarity between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). This degree can vary with regard to the conceptual and structural differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL): the bigger the differences are the lower the equivalence level generally is. In case of insurmountable differences, the translator should sacrifice equivalence in favour of adequacy, or appropriateness of translation. This presupposes adapting the translation to the needs of the target audience, its value system, and background knowledge, if possible. Culture-specific units frequently encode values, beliefs, cultural norms of a social group which are hidden from other groups. Such units represent what is known as a visible part of the «cultural iceberg». To produce an adequate translation, a translator should have a clear understanding of the messages hidden «below the water surface». This understanding is commonly followed by the choice of a translation technique which could best cover the message in the TL. The paper follows the classification of the translation techniques which includes omission, expansion, using an exoticism, updating, creation, using a situational equivalent. The choice of a technique is determined by the character of a culture-specific unit and translator's competence.

Key words: translation equivalence, translation adequacy, a political text, adaptation, culture, cultural translation, translation techniques.

У цій статті розглядаються питання, пов'язані з особливостями перекладу культурно-специфічних одиниць у політичних текстах. Переклад таких одиниць може бути проблемним завданням, оскільки передбачає розуміння інформації, закодованої глибоко в культурі соціальної спільноти. Перекладач політичного тексту повинен зберігати баланс між еквівалентністю й адекватністю для створення зрозумілого перекладу, котрий зберігає ті самі ідеї, які передає текст оригіналу. Під еквівалентністю зазвичай розуміють ступінь семантичної схожості між текстом оригіналу (ТО) і текстом перекладу (ТП). Цей ступінь може варіюватися залежно від поняттєвих і структурних відмінностей між мовою оригіналу (МО) і мовою перекладу (МП): чим більшими є ці відмінності, тим зазвичай меншим є ступінь еквівалентності. У випадку, коли ці відмінності стають нездоланними, перекладач має поступитися еквівалентністю на користь адекватності, або доречності перекладу. Такий поступ передбачає адаптацію перекладу до потреб, цінностей, фонових знань цільової аудиторії, якщо в цьому є необхідність. У культурно-специфічних одиницях часто закодовані цінності, вірування, культурні норми соціальної групи, що приховані від інших груп. Такі одиниці репрезентують так звану видиму частину «культурного айсбергу». Для створення адекватного перекладу перекладачеві слід мати чітке розуміння інформації, прихованої «під поверхнею води». За таким розумінням зазвичай слідує вибір перекладацького прийому, здатного найкраще передати інформацію МП. У статті ми послуговуємося класифікацією перекладацьких прийомів, до якої зараховують випущення, розширення, використання екзотизмів, оновлення, креацію, використання ситуативного еквіваленту. Вибір прийому визначається особливостями культурно-специфічної одиниці та рівнем компетентності перекладача.

Ключові слова: еквівалентність перекладу, адекватність перекладу, політичний текст, адаптація, культура, культурний переклад, перекладацькі прийоми.

Establishing the problem. In recent years there has been an intense increase of interest in the analysis of political texts caused by the growth of their manipulative power on the citizens of the states and global society. Translation theory pays attention to those aspects of political texts which pose problems in the adequate transition from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT). Translators serve as agents who are supposed to faithfully do their work as mediators in the situations of translating political texts [1, p. 141].

The realization of this task can be inhibited by numerous factors, cultural differences between the ST and the TT being one of the most significant. According to E. Nida [2, p. 13], «before establishing a general theory of translating, it will be necessary to have a generally acceptable theory of culture, and such is much more difficult than setting up a standard theory of language». Ignoring the cultural aspect of translation will definitely reduce its adequacy and, therefore, requires special consideration from translators.

The paper **aims** to analyze the techniques used in the translation of culture-specific units of the political texts. This analysis employs the concepts of translation equivalence and adequacy, culture and an «iceberg model» of it. The article also provides general characteristics of the political text as a specific text type. The techniques of translating culture-specific units are exemplified by the fragments of the authentic political texts and their translation counterparts.

Previous research. The study employs the theoretical legacy of the scholars researching translation equivalence and adequacy [3; 4; 5], specifics of translating political discourse [6; 1], and most importantly, cultural aspects of translating process [7; 8; 9].

Major issues. Current historical period is characterized by the intensification of relations between nations and states and by eliminating cultural and language barriers. Supranational entities are regularly appearing on the international political arena. Such a globalized world can exist on condition that there is effective communication between political actors belonging to different cultural and language worlds. One such means to ensure this communication is the translation of the texts (both oral and written) belonging to the political discourse. Centuries long tradition of translation shows that «translation is neither just an act or an instance of translation nor just a product but a complex activity during which the translator transmits cultural and ideological messages as well» [6, p. 160]. Translation is regarded as a creative activity enriching the ST with new ideological and cultural features. According to S. Bassnett [7], we should consider translation not only as a type of linguistic activity but also as a kind of communication within and among cultures.

Translation of political texts, which this paper focuses on, should adapt general principles and methods of translation theory to the texts utilized in the sphere of political communication. Further in this article we analyze such major concepts of translation theory as equivalence and adequacy, provide arguments in favor of choosing adequacy over equivalence in the situations when it is impossible to adhere to both, characterize a political text as a specific object of translation, explain the importance of considering a cultural aspect of translation, and outline the ways to resolve translation problems related to cultural differences underlying the ST and the TT.

Translation as a transfer from the ST to the TT presupposes the change of a form. As for the meaning of a transmitted message, theoretically it should remain unchanged. The practical realization of this principle, though, poses problems due to the lack of absolute coincidences between the languages and conceptual systems they represent. The concept employed by scholars when it comes to comparing the semantics of the ST and TT is translation equivalence.

Equivalence is considered to be a central concept in translation theory. Scholars are divided in terms of defining equivalence and developing the typology of its kinds. A great number of translation theorists propose to define equivalence as a relationship between the ST and the TT encoded in the degree of similarity between them [5]. As W. Koller argues (see [3, p. 99]), equivalence is typically established on the assumption that the ST and the TT refer to the same object(s) in the experiential world – this is called referential or denotative experience. The typology of translation equivalence also includes such types as connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, dynamic, formal, textual and functional equivalence [3, p. 97] the analysis of which goes far beyond the objectives of this paper. The classification of equivalence types which we consider worth mentioning is the one proposed by E. Nida [10, p. 193–200; see also 6, p. 173] who distinguishes between formal and dynamic equivalence. By formal equivalence he means correspondence between the ST and the TT in both form and content; the TL item should be the closest equivalent of a SL word or phrase. Dynamic equivalence is opposed to formal equivalence and means that the translator attempts to render the ST meaning in such a way so that it would produce the same impact on the TL audience as the original would produce on the SL audience.

This research joins the scholars who regard equivalence as a concept which shows the degree of semantic proximity between ST and TT. This degree is determined not only by the translator's ability to find the closest possible word, phrase, or a sentence, but also by the specifics of the ST itself [5]: some text types/genres allow for achieving a higher degree of proximity in translation than the others. When the translator finds it difficult or impossible to produce a translation with a high degree of proximity (formal equivalence in E. Nida's typology) he seeks ways to produce a translation that would make the same effect on the target audience (dynamic equivalence in E. Nida's typology). The latter overlaps with what is known as adequacy in translation theory.

K. Reiss [4, p. 301] explains **adequacy** as appropriateness which is nothing in itself – it can be seen in relation to other actions. The scholar understands adequacy as a relation between means and purpose and considers it to be process-oriented. K. Reiss and H. Vermeer [5, p. 127–128] in their skopos theory consider the translation to be adequate if the translator's decisions are consistently in line with the translation purpose. Thus, equivalence as the relationship

between the ST and the TT is a particular kind of adequacy, that is adequacy on condition that the purpose (skopos) requires the ST and the TT to achieve the same communicative function. The concepts of equivalence and adequacy are applied to the translation of any kind of text, a political text in particular.

K. Sárosi-Márdirosz describes a **political text** as characterized by persuasion, reasoning, deceit or even hustling. Persuasion aims to convince the reader/hearer to agree with the author's ideas. First, the author attempts to attract the reader/hearer's attention to the problem put forth; then they try to convince the audience that they are competent enough to solve the problem. Persuasive texts tend to use both logical and emotional appeals often publicly accompanied by the appropriate body language. Such texts also require clear logical argumentation. The latter can be used not only by people related to politics but also by academics, media and ordinary citizens in everyday communication. A specific feature of political argumentation is that it relies on evidence (facts, statistics, official reports, etc.). If argumentation does not persuade the reader/hearer, then deceit, misguidance, and hustling can follow. The speaker can present false information, make promises they cannot keep [6, p. 165].

The translator cannot analyze political words in isolation but should take into account the context: the whole phrase, clause, sentence, or even the entire text. The pragmatic value of the political language is «heavier» than that of common language; political language contains a considerable number of performative words, or those constituting new reality [6, p. 168].

A specific political text occupies a particular place in the whole political system, all the constituents of which are strongly related. These relations, or intra-textual coherence, is ensured by the use of specific political vocabulary and some commonly used transition elements, e.g., *regarding*, *breaking a contract*, *furthermore*, etc. Political texts frequently contain long over-complicated and unclear phrases which contradicts the idea of logical argumentation of political texts. This is generally caused by the lack of competence of the authors of the texts. The translator needs to utilize specialized language and to be careful not to change the content of the ST, no matter what logical flaws (s)he finds in it. Political translation employs a considerable number of specialized collocations [6, p. 169]. Some political documents can be highly formalized, and the translator's task lies in transferring all the features of the ST into the TT, at the same time preserving the smoothness of it.

One of the aspects of political texts which can pose problems in translation is a cultural aspect. **Culture** is an inseparable unique part of a nation's worldview. The term «culture» can be used in a variety of meanings. D. Katan [8, p. 26] proposes to define culture as a shared «model of the world», a hierarchical system of congruent and interrelated beliefs, values and strategies which can guide action and interaction, depending on cognitive context. The levels of culture can be represented by the anthropological iceberg model, the 'Triad of Culture'. The concept of the cultural iceberg was proposed in 1976 by Edward T. Hall [11] who understood culture as analogous to an iceberg 10% of which is above the water surface and is therefore visible and the rest 90% is hidden below the surface. The model (see Fig. 1) illustrates how much of culture is invisible, intangible. It also demonstrates that values and beliefs are deeply set in our subconscious mind [12, p. 70].

Understanding the concept of the cultural iceberg affects the translation process as it provides the translator with an idea of different levels of accessibility to different levels of the message aimed for translation. Translation theorists are more concerned with the hidden levels of the message while translation practitioners are more focused on the surface levels. According to D. Katan, different levels of the cultural iceberg can be understood as different systems of frames, with each requiring a different approach in translation. When dealing with cultural frames «above the water», the focus of the translator is usually on the visible text. The task of the translator is
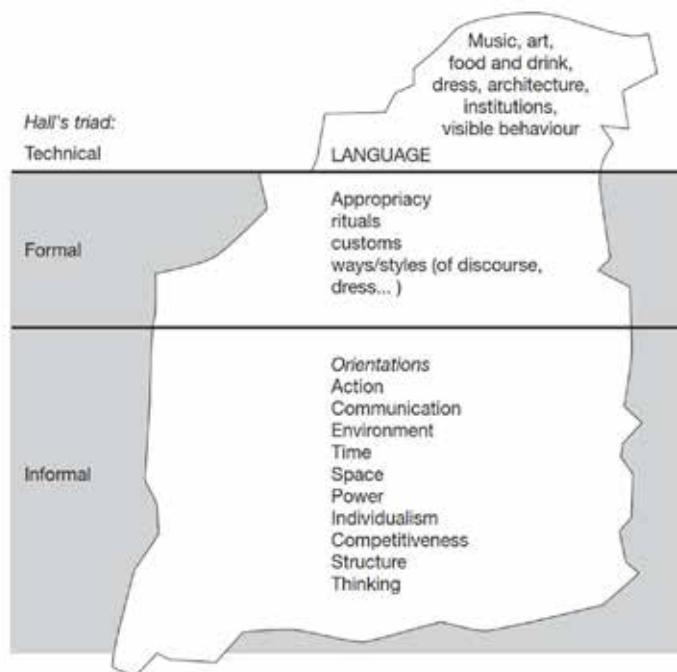

Fig. 1. Cultural iceberg [12, p. 71]

to transfer the terms and concepts of the source text with minimum loss, with as great a level of equivalence as possible [12, p. 70].

Since culture is encoded into the political text, it becomes impossible for the translator to ignore it. Therefore, (s)he needs to appeal to **cultural translation** – the term generally used to refer to those practices of literary translation that mediate cultural differences, or try to convey extensive cultural background, or set out to represent another culture via translation. Translation theorists often oppose cultural translation to linguistic or grammatical translation that is limited to the sentences on the page. Cultural translation is also explained not as a particular kind of translation but rather a perspective of translation that focuses on the ideological component of a message transmitted from one language group to another [9].

The term «cultural translation» was developed in cultural anthropology which focuses on the translation on a variety of levels. Anthropologists presume that our experiences of the world are filtered by language and culture to a great extent. Respectively, it can be rather problematic to grasp and convey experiences of a different culture, especially rather distant from our own cultural frames of reference [9].

The translator not only needs to understand the content of a political ST but also should be able to convert it into the TT in a way understandable for the target audience with a different language and culture. Sometimes the difference between political systems and cultures is so huge that the translator needs to apply **adaptation** which J.-P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet define as «a procedure which can be used whenever the context referred to in the original text does not exist in the culture of the target text, thereby necessitating some form of re-creation» (see [6, p. 170]).

Adaptation is also explained as a set of interventions resulting in a text that is not generally accepted as a translation but is nevertheless recognized as representing the ST [13, p. 3]. Some scholars consider adaptation the only approach possible when it comes to translating culture-specific units, while the others continue to reject adaptation as distorting, falsifying the ST.

K. Sárosi-Márdirosz [6, p. 170–171] suggests utilizing the following **techniques** in order to adequately translate culture-specific elements of the political text: omission, expansion, using an exoticism, updating, creation, using a situational equivalent. Omission presupposes elimination or reduction of a part of the ST. In case of expansion, information implicit in the ST is made explicit in the TT either in the main text or in footnotes or a glossary. Exoticism means the substitution of slang, dialectal or nonsense words in

the ST by rough equivalents in the TT. The author applies updating when (s)he replaces outdated or obscure words by modern ones. The translation decision in favor of situational equivalence is determined by the necessity to insert a more familiar context than the one used in the original. Creation is such a translation technique that presupposes a more global replacement of the ST with the TT which preserves only the essential ideas of the original. Further in the article we will exemplify some instances of dealing with culture-specific elements used in political texts.

In Barack Obama's speech, his official announcement of candidacy for US President, he pronounces the sentence '*The genius of our Founders is that they designed a system of government that can be changed*' [14]. The noun *Founders* is culture-specific and can be understood only if a person knows that *Founders*, more commonly called *Founding Fathers*, are a group of American revolutionary leaders who established the United States of America. Therefore, the noun *Founders* can be translated into Ukrainian as *батьки-засновники США* and, if the situation requires, accompanied by the explanation *політичні діячі, які відіграли ключову роль у становленні США як держави*. The translation technique applied in this case is expansion.

A similar approach to the translation of a culture-specific unit can be applied to other Obama's words in the mentioned-above speech, '*Most of all, let's be the generation that never forgets what happened on that September day and confront the terrorists with everything we've got*'. By *that September day* Obama means the atrocities of September 11, 2001 when al-Qaeda terrorists crashed two planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A possible translation of the unit *that September day* could be *трагедія 11 вересня 2001 року*. A bigger expansion is hardly necessary as a lot of people know about the tragic events which happened on September 11, 2001.

One more example of employing expansion as a translation technique can be the translation of the phrase *the Oval Office* found in numerous texts of the American politicians. *The Oval Office* is the office of the American President in the White House. The Ukrainian translation *Овальний кабінет* can be insufficient for an adequate translation as not all the readers/listeners possess background information behind the expression. Explanation like *робочий кабінет президента США у Білому домі* might be rather helpful in making a comprehensible translation.

The choice of a translation technique can be determined by the situation: one and the same linguistic unit will be translated differently in a

different contextual environment. As an example, we will consider the translation of the phrase *We the People* – the introductory phrase of the US Constitution Preamble. In his speech [15] Joe Biden says, '*It's about you, your families, your futures. It's about "We the People." We can never forget that, and I never have*'. *We the People* can be translated here as *Конституція США*. In Barack Obama's speech [16] we find this phrase in a broader authentic wording, '*We the People, in order to form a more perfect union*'. The translator can refer to an official translation of this US Constitution here, '*Ми, народ Сполучених Штатів, щоб створити досконаліший союз*'. This translation is almost literal with the addition (expansion in K. Sárosi-Márdirosz's terminology) of the phrase *Сполучених Штатів*. The translator's comment on this phrase as the beginning of the preamble to the Constitution can be given either in brackets or in the footnotes, if required. Thus, the equivalents proposed in these cases are situational.

Sometimes politicians appeal to proverbs and sayings as, for example, British prime minister Boris Johnson in his address to the Ukrainian Parliament [17], '*You have proved the old saying – it's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog – which is an old English saying, I'm not sure how well that translates in Ukrainian but you get what I'm trying to say*'. Translating proverbs and sayings is considered to be one of the most difficult tasks in translation theory as the cultural coloring they bear is almost untranslatable. Such units can be referred to as exoticisms, and if finding an equivalent proverb or saying in the TT poses problems, the translator can simply explain the meaning of the exotic culture-specific unit, '*Для перемоги важливий не розмір того, хто бореться, а його сила духу*'.

The next culture-specific unit can be best translated by the closest equivalent in the TL, '*So, I've decided the best way forward is to pass the torch to a new generation*' These are Joe Biden's words from his address to the nation on not seeking re-election [15]. *To pass the torch* is an American idiom which means 'to give one's duties to another person'. In Ukrainian there is an idiom *передати естафету* which has a similar meaning. Thus, we replace a SL idiom by a

TL idiom that employs a different image though is semantically similar.

The provided examples of translating culture-specific expressions used in political texts show how much information that constitutes the semantics of these expressions can be hidden from the target audience in the «underwater» part of the cultural iceberg. In order to adapt culture-specific expressions for the target audience, the translator needs to utilize various techniques.

Conclusions. Translators of political texts are supposed to adapt general principles and methods of translation theory to the needs of political communication. Concepts universally recognized by translation theorists and practitioners are equivalence and adequacy. Equivalence is generally explained as the degree of semantic proximity between the ST and the TT. Conceptual and structural differences between the SL and the TL often make it difficult to achieve a high degree of equivalence. Sometimes the translator should sacrifice equivalence in favor of adequacy, or appropriateness of translation. The translation is considered adequate if its effect on the target audience equals the effect of the ST on the SL audience. Translation of political texts requires a high degree of adequacy, otherwise it can result in miscommunication between the parties and, consequently, international conflicts. Such adequacy, however, is not always easily achieved, especially when it comes to the translation of culture-specific units.

Culture as a system of congruent and interrelated beliefs, values and strategies can be metaphorically compared to an iceberg with only about 10% being above the water surface. The translator's task is to understand the message hidden below the water surface and render this message in the translation. Cultural translation presupposes the use of certain techniques aimed at adapting the ST to the TL audience. The article adheres to the classification of translation techniques which includes omission, expansion, using an exoticism, updating, creation, using a situational equivalent. Exemplification of these techniques that was provided in this paper demonstrates cultural translation in action and offers solutions to numerous problems of translating culture-specific units in political texts.

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