TEACHING PRE-TRANSLATION ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of translation teaching practices. The focus is made on developing a cognitive translation algorithm which can be applied in practice when training would-be-translators. The algorithm was built on the results of student research into translation errors. Analysis of The Lower Depths by Gorky translated into English and Russian version of Stoppard’s Arcadia helped reveal the most challenging areas in E-R and R-E translation and establish strong regularities between the source and the target languages. The research resulted in a three-stage practice-oriented translation algorithm. At the first stage culture-specific elements are examined, including realia, stylistics, names etc. Then structural differences between inflexional Russian and analytical English language are considered. The next step is to analyze words, then proceed to morphology and, if needed, turn to phonetic level. This comprehensive approach makes pre-translation analysis a reliable translation tool and provides rationale for translator’s decision-making.

Keywords: translation algorithm, pre-translation analysis, translation errors, culture-specific aspects, structural differences.

1 INTRODUCTION

Translation process is commonly regarded as a three-level activity: first comes understanding of the contents of the original which is followed by translation per se, after that the translator assesses the translated text as either (fully) equivalent to the original, or not [1]. Translation theory, most often, focuses on the assessment stage determining whether the resulting text is equivalent to the original, and to what extent [2].

Practical teaching, however, revealed that understanding the contents of the text and its message does not necessarily lead to the ultimate result. It seems that understanding per se without explicit explanation what regularities govern the translator’s choice is not enough, as teaching a translator implies that we are not working towards an intuitive decision. The original text should be “de-composed” into the fragments of contents- and structure-wise, to be later re-composed in the process of translation. This de-composition, or pre-translation analysis must be practiced at the initial teaching level; then, with the regular practice it gets intuitive, almost automatical, though in some respects it still calls for comprehensive analysis.

It means that students are expecting some practical algorithm which will establish strong and well-grounded correlation between the original text and its translated version. Working towards this correlation starts at the very beginning: after the translator understands the contents of the original text, s/he proceeds to analyzing the original from the target-language perspective – its cultural background, stylistics and pragmatics, then its grammatical structure, lexical, morphological and (sometimes) phonetical features which, presumably, may lead to inadequate translation, if ignored [3].

And here we need to elaborate some algorithm, some cognitive translation frame which can be applied at the first teaching stage. The authors suggest a step-by-step algorithm that can be practiced when training would-be-translators. The algorithm is supported by the research into resulting translation mistakes – so the authors chose the approach “from the result”. In other words, the result is the direct consequence (at least partly, we do not take into account a possible lack of linguistic competence of a translator) of the translator’s inadequate perception of the above elements. We shall go back and see what was neglected at the initial stage thus leading to inadequate translation.

2 METHODOLOGY

To deduce the initial miscalculation the authors assigned the master students with different tasks related to pre-translation analysis, they suggested analyzing translations of two plays: Russian-to-English (the play by M.Gorky The Lower Depths, translated by L. Irving, J. Covan, M. Wettlin) and English-to-Russian (the play by T. Stoppard Arcadia, translated by Olga Varshaver, Ekaterina
Rakitina, Boris Tukh). The students were asked to locate different types of mistakes in the translated texts: with the focus on the means which are often a challenge translation-wise - e.g., realia, defining general text stylistics, translating modality, verbals, specific grammar construction, characters’ names, etc. and check if it was correctly translated.

3 RESULTS

The algorithm starts with analyzing the culture-specific content, such as realia relating to cultural or historic relics, or – which is less discernible without training – the differences in the linguistic map of the world.

3.1 Culture-specific Content: Realia in Translation

In this respect it might be interesting to see how different translators (E. Rakitina and O. Varshaver) handle this challenge in the same extract from Arcadia: Is it standing on one leg and singing ‘When Father Painted the Parlour’? When Father Papered the Parlour used to be a popular song in Britain in 1910. E. Rakitina chose word-for-word translation: Стоит на одной ноге и распевает «Когда папа покрасил гостиную?» which can hardly serve as a proper equivalent. Popular British songs and rhymes of the early century obviously say little to the Russian-speaking reader. In contrast, O. Varshaver translates this extract changing one culture-specific element for another – a more familiar rhyme: “У Пегги жил веселый гусь”. It is an adapted Russian version of a popular Scottish children’s song: “Katie Bairdie had a horse that could dance around the carse Wasnae that a dainty horse? Dance, Katie Bairdie”. With the new character – Peggy –this version became quite popular in Russia. Thus, partial modification of culture-bound facts appears to be more effective in conveying the author’s intention.

Cf. also: She is wearing workaday period clothes, a Regency dress, no hat - Она одета в будничное платье эпохи Регентства, без шляпы (B. Tukh). The reference to the historic period in England of 1811-1820 (largely to the pattern of dresses commonly worn that time) might be lost on the general Russian reader. Common sense suggests describing rather the dress silhouette to let the reader’s make their associations, cf.: простое платье с завышенной талией в стиле ампир – a plain dress with high waistline, Empire style (this architectural and clothing style is well-known with educated Russians).

3.1.1 Register Considerations

Stylistics-wise, from the very beginning, Gorky’s play was qualified as featuring low colloquial vernacular as it features lowest possible social stratum – tramps surviving in substandard housing. What follows is that the low colloquial was likely to pose a lot of translation difficulties, as any low colloquial in any language is. In this respect Kitty Hunter Blair, one of The Lower Depths English translators remarks: it is the spoken word and the ways in which it is used and abused in this play which makes the biggest problem a translator faces with [4].

The translation strategy in such cases can be reduced to the three ones: either ignoring some phrases and simply omitting them, or changing their stylistics, toward more neutral or, vice versa, more negative, still finally, finding a perfect equivalent, which is often next to impossible.

3.1.2 Low Vernacular: Russian – English Translation

In the extract to follow the main difficulty is the word левоверт – this is how one of the tramps from “The Lower Depths” distorts the pronunciation of the word револьвер (gun), as it appears bookish and therefore too difficult for him. Two translations were studied: I trembled with fear and grief he trembled, too . . . he was as white as chalk – and he had the pistol in his hand …(J. Covan). The neutral term pistol reduces the emotional charge of the text as it fails to characterize the speech patterns of social outcasts. M. Wettlin offers a corrupted version of revolver – involver. The meaning of the word is easily made out in the context, and at the same time the effect of demotic speech is preserved.

Another strategy is employed in the next example: Чучело! Нализался... Both characteristics sound low vernacular and derogative. In the English translation Scarecrow! You’re drunk! (L. Irving) the first epithet conveys an emotion very close to the original, while the second one neutral and lacks nuances.
3.1.3 *Idioms on the Stylistic Palette of the Play*

Idioms, being culture- and register-bound, often call for special effort, e.g.: Как издох мой милый муженек, - ни дна бы ему ни покрышки, - так я целый день от радости одна просидела: сижу и все не верю счастью своему... When my beloved husband kicked the bucket, I spent the whole day all by my lonely — just bursting with joy. I sat and simply couldn’t believe it was true... (J. Covan).

The first colloquialism издох is rendered into English with the idiom *kicked the bucket*, which is obviously a slang, still not as contemptuous as the Russian one. When it comes to the second - emphatic offensive term, ни дна бы ему ни покрышки, the translator chose to omit it.

In the next version by L. Irving this idiom was treated literally which led to a confusing translation: When my beloved old man breathed his last, may I never 'ave a roof over my 'ead, if I didn't just sit up for joy a whole day and night. First, the respectful euphemism *breathe one's last* in the combination with my beloved old man (lacking in the original sarcasm) strikes as the opposite to what the author implied (despise and anger). Secondly, the word-for-word translation of the idiom may I never 'ave a roof over my 'ead makes little sense. Overall, it leaves the utterance absolutely improbable as the character (Kvashnia) appears to blame herself for her much hated husband’s death.

3.1.4 *Going Overboard*

In English-to-Russian translation (*Arcadia*), on the contrary, the scene is laid in two time frames, one of them in the 19th century aristocratic family where we can expect the communication style typical of the epoch and social status of the communicators. The landlady’s daughter though shot an emphatic English *I hope you die!* -phrase which was rendered as extremely expressive Russian чтоб вы все сдохли! using a low colloquial absent in the original. The considerations of register are pretty well ignored here.

3.1.5 *Names*

Lexically, what challenges the translator, was transliterating realia, and – unsurprisingly – rendering the characters’ names – in one dialogue the person is addressed as Vasily (the full Christian name) and in a minute as Vas’ka (which is somehow a derogative version, especially in this context). The viewer is left guessing whether two different people are meant, and if not, why switching to another version. Besides being a colloquial version, the shorter one carries some negative connotation (cf. quite a different correlation between Robert and Rob or Robbie). What students suggested here was to take the liberty and add comments on the names’ implications as they clearly define the social status and attitude to the person of his / her companions.

What is relevant here is that the choice of the form of address, defining the stylistic palette of the play in general (a translator is expected to turn to low colloquial whether in the choice of words or syntax) is the initial point the translator is to take into account.

3.1.6 *Allusions*

This same level of analysis also deals with allusions – in Stoppard’s play an allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* is lost upon the general reader / spectator, e.g.:

*Lady Capulet:* *She’s not fourteen.*

*Nurse:* I’ll lay fourteen of my teeth,—

*And yet, to my teeth be it spoken, I have but four-*

**She is not fourteen. How long is it now**

*To Lammas-tide?*

*Lady Capulet:* *A fortnight and odd days.*

*And:*

*Lord Capulet:* My child is yet a stranger in the world;

**She hath not seen the change of fourteen years,**

**Let two more summers wither in their pride** (*Romeo and Juliette. Shakespeare*).

In *Arcadia* Thomasina Coverly opens the Characters list as she first appears on stage: it is indicated that she is aged thirteen, later sixteen (at the age of sixteen she dies as it turns out in the end).
This is how the author of Arcadia alludes to Shakespeare:

Lady Croom: Something has occurred with the girl since I saw her last, and surely that was yesterday. How old are you this morning?

Thomasina: Thirteen years and ten months, mama.

Lady Croom: Thirteen years and ten months. She is not due to be pert for six months at the earliest, or to have notions of taste for much longer. - Сколько тебе стукнуло сегодня? Томасина. Тринадцать лет и десять месяцев… Гм… Рановато. Дерзить ей не подобает еще по крайней мере полгода. А иметь свое мнение и вкус в таком возрасте вообще не пристало (О. Варшавер).

Yet, with Shakespeare works translated into Russian about 250 times, allusions to his most famous tragedies might be made discernible with Russian readers, e.g. Ей нет еще четырнадцати лет (transl. by D. Mikhailovsky). It would be a good solution to couple it with the reference to the source in the footnote.

In other words, the translation mistakes students found could have been avoided at the pre-translation stage.

3.2 Structural Transformations

Let’s proceed now to the “lower” pre-translation level analysis – to structural differences.

If we take structurally different languages, such as inflectional Russian and analytical English languages, we have to take into account structural differences, which tell on the translator’s choice. The languages may have similar structures and seemingly coinciding words and constructions though their functions and stylistic relevance may significantly differ.

For instance, translating Russian rhetoric sentence into English the translator has to keep in mind that the niche allocated to this question in English is very narrow as compared to that of the Russian rhetoric construction. It explains why Russian rhetoric questions in many cases are transformed into affirmative sentences: Какие только меры мы не принимали! - We took all possible measures [3].

3.2.1 Structural Language Differences

Students looked into the potentially challenging grammatical structures in the original, such as participial constructions in both languages, Russian verbal nouns to finally match them with the translated versions to discover strong correlations between common predicative structures in the English and Russian languages.

3.2.1.1 Semi-predicative Structures: English-Russian Transformations

Semi-predicative English structures (participles and infinitives) tend to be unfolded into full Russian predicates, especially if the degree of their communicative dynamism is high enough, cf.: If I am promised a fountain I expect it to come with water - Если мне обещают фонтан, имеется в виду, что в нем будет вода (Б. Тух). The infinitive’s function here is to specify (whatever it is), which makes it rheumatic and calls for a full description in the Russian version. This pattern also applies to the Infinitive of Consequence, which is traditionally rheumatic in the sentence. The best (and safest) way to render it into Russian is to use a separate clause (full predicate) - One of the side doors leads to the music room. It is the other side door which now opens to admit Jelliby, the butler - Одна из боковых дверей ведет в музыкальную гостиную. Открывается дверь напротив, и входит Джеллаби, дворецкий (Е. Ракитина). Cf.: With a large gesture of pure happiness, Bernard throws his arms around Hannah and gives her a great smacking kiss on the cheek. Chloe enters to witness the end of this. - В порыве абсолютного счастья, Бернард прижимает Ханну к себе и смачно целует в щеку. Вошедшая Хлоя застает конец этой сцены (Е. Ракитина). Входит Хлоя и становится свидетелем финала этой сцены (Б. Тух).

The Independent participle clause is in most cases transformed into a full clause, e.g.: Indeed I wish it had passed uneventfully with you and Mr Chater shooting each other with the decorum due to a civilized house - Я многое бы отдала за то, чтобы она прошла спокойно, чтобы Вы с мистером Чейтером застрелили друг друга с соблюдением всех приличий, принятых в светском обществе (Е. Ракитина).
In many cases the translator chooses to keep a similar predicative structure: He dies to read it - Он жаждет ее прочитать; Hannah turns back, puzzled – Ханна, озадаченная его поведением, останавливается (O. Varshaver).

More examples: Valentine goes out again, closing the door - Валентайн исчезает, захлопнув дверь (О. Varshaver). Cf. also: Валентин исчезает и закрывает дверь (Е. Rakitina). Still, both translations look doubtful, mostly due to the unreasonable choice of an equivalent for a neutral go out. Исчезать (disappear) seems to introduce a new shade of meaning to the context – making the leaving unexpected - thus the the significance of this action changes, making it rheumatic in the sentence. It is impossible to disappear unexpectedly, slamming the door behind, though this is exactly what Valentine does it in the translated text. It would make more sense to employ a Russian neutral verb to avoid adding unnecessary dynamism and suspense in the translated extract: Валентайн выходит из комнаты, закрыв за собой дверь.

3.2.1.2 Russian Secondary Predicative Structures in the English Text

There is solid evidence to suggest that the most common way of rendering Russian participles and converbs (nonfinite verb expressing adverbial subordination) into English is looking for a similar structure, cf.: Актер останавливается, не затворяя двери, на пороге и, придерживаясь руками за косынки, кричит – The Actor standing in the open door, supporting himself against the door-posts, shouts out (L. Irving) Or: Клещ идет сзади всех, медленно, съежившись. – Kleshtch comes after the others, slowly, shrunk up (J. Covan).

However, if the text analysis shows that if the actions described by the converb and the full predicate are equally important, the Russian semi-predicative structure is made a homogeneous predicate, cf.: Клещ оглядывается, молча подходит к жене, смотрит на нее и делает какие-то жесты руками, как бы желая что-то сказать - Kleshtch, glancing around, silently walks over to his wife, looks at her, and makes queer gestures with his hands, as though he wanted to say something (J. Covan). Cf. also: Лука молчит, улыбаясь - Luka smiles, but says nothing (M. Wettlin); Gus comes forward, startling Hannah – Гас подходит к столу. Ханна испуганно вскидывается (O. Varshaver).

In contrast, if a Russian semi-predicative structure is employed to add extra how -where-because-while details to the whole picture – an English noun group, an adjective are chosen: На постели, закрытая пологом, кашляет Анна – In the bed, behind curtains, Anna lies coughing (J. Covan). А налево – серая, покрытая остатками штукатурки стен – Left, the grey, tumbledown wall of Kostilyoff’s night asylum (J. Covan).

Russian deverbal nouns are prolific in different registers unlike English ones. That explains the most common translation strategy – transforming deverbal nouns into more explicit verbal forms, cf.: И за меня жертва пойдет, в воздаяние грехов моих, и за тебя тоже. Ведь сам ты о грехах своих не думаешь... I’ll buy oil for the ikon lamp, and my offering will atone for my sins, and for yours as well. You don’t think much of your sins — not much! (J. Covan). Or: Я – свидетель… отданы деньги на сохранение… числом – сколько? – I am a witness . . . the money is placed in your keepin’ . . . ‘ow much is it? (L. Irvine).

3.3 Translation Problems on other Language Levels

The next step was to analyze the words, then sometimes proceed to the morphology and, if needed, turn to phonetic level.

In the case under consideration the focus was mostly on the choice of words.

The translator’s decision to preserve a distinctly foreign word (carnal kiss) in Russian as карнальный (O. Varshver, B. Tukh), which does not exist in Russian was quite justified as the protagonist has no idea what the word meant and asks for its definition from her mentor the moment she mentions it. The effect was quite matching the original, so the translation can be regarded as absolutely equivalent.

So, when training professional translator we start with pre-translation analysis and only after that proceed to translation per se.
4 CONCLUSIONS

The pre-translation analysis presented in the paper has a decade-long and successful story in Moscow City University. Developed by the team of Translation Department teaching staff, it was implemented in translation teaching practice (in the translation manual *Grammatical Aspects of Translation*) about 10 years ago and since has proved it really works. Apart from a set of instrumental stratagems the suggested approach equips the translator with the rationale for translation decision-making, which is hard to overestimate.

REFERENCES