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Culture-bound elements: Rendering and preserving in translation

ABSTRACT

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Each culture is unique and has its own unique objects or phenomena related to its history, traditions, and cultural identity. These specific objects, otherwise called culture-bound elements, may be strange and unrecognizable to another culture. Translators are often challenged to translate the text of one culture to another and to convey the names of cultural elements, while still preserving their unique meaning, as well as their national and cultural colour. The aim of the article is to analyse the strategies and techniques by means of which the names of Lithuanian culture-bound elements are translated into English in a work devoted to public affairs. To what extent the original is preserved in the foreign-language environment clarifies the (dis)harmony. In short, the name of a culture-bound element is an integral part of such work that otherwise would not accomplish its purpose.

Keywords: culture-bound elements, translation, strategies, rendering, preserving

A popular genre of travel guides that provide general insight into the practical experience of living in or visiting other countries often draws attention to one's own country – the tendency has been particularly noticeable in Lithuania in recent years. New texts on the culture can often match with commemoration days, jubilees of the author or the country, which is being described or shown with the intention to promote, i.e., invite to visit or represent anew an unfamiliar country or a forgotten region, its unique context, objects, important events, people, etc. Such publications are destined to maintain objective formality, yet local characteristics, the specificity of language and culture may cause reader's subjective

perception of the text. Objective multiple layers of perception are likely to occur in cases of rendering a text in another language, for instance via translation: figurative and deep meanings, the resolution to decode them, preparation and readiness of the reader. The ratio between those readings of the original source texts and their translations adds certain charm to the source and target texts, especially when it concerns several millions native speakers of the source language and those readers that speak another language widely used in the world. Due to globalisation the need and necessity of translation has been increasing. Lithuania has been frequently introduced and presented to the world by means of and in terms of translation.

The aim of the article is to introduce and discuss problems, strategies and techniques used to render the culture-specific lexical elements from Lithuanian into English in one travel guide, written by a Lithuanian author. The peculiarities and specificity of rendering culture-bound elements found in a text devoted to public affairs in another language are presented in a descriptive-comparative way. The object of the discussion may be found in various texts, yet it is most likely to occur in texts introducing cultures and therefore a modern publication about Lithuania and its translation into English was chosen as the object of the present research. The direction of translation is from Lithuanian into English: the choice was partly influenced by the centenary jubilee of the Republic of Lithuania celebrated in 2018 that encouraged contemplation of the state's achievements. The introduction of Lithuania to the world by means of translated texts spreads information about the country and contributes to its publicity and popularity.

According to Bitinienė (2007: 11), the publicistic style is widely described as a means of mass communication that has various forms of expression. The sphere of its use widens due to the development of technologies; different verbal and non-verbal means of expression are matched together. Any artistic text devoted to public affairs as part of the genre is based on both important functions of language: the informative as well as the persuasive function, when the effort is made to engage the reader, persuade by means of logic and emotions. Not the facts themselves but also their presentation comes into focus here as it helps to form the reader's attitude or persuade him/her. It may also change the reader's opinion about the object, his/her general emotional attitude, widen his/her worldview.

The book written by a Lithuanian journalist, publicist, TV and event hostess, Edita Mildažytė *Pasimatymas su Lietuva* (literal translation of the title: *A Date with Lithuania*, published by *Tyto alba* in 2011, with 424 pages and an edition of 3000 copies) is a narrative about modern Lithuania. This book of large scope comprises texts that may encourage a deeper interest in culture, history, science of the country not only for Lithuanian readers, but guests from other countries as well. Therefore, an English translation of the book *Lithuania at First Sight* was published by the same publisher *Tyto alba* in 2012 (edition of 2000 copies). The

texts are richly illustrated with photos partly made especially for this particular book; the publication also includes a CD that offers a possibility to know the culture of the country via the audio channel. One may smile: there are no smells and tastes. However, they will probably be included next time.

It has to be noted that the author of the book aims to informatively represent her view of Lithuania: a small country in Eastern Europe, its uniqueness, social life, her comment upon its experiences, life in the 21st century and perspectives for the future. The chosen mode of expression reminds of a guide through and in Lithuania: to give a glance to its geography, history, culture; the objectivity of facts is connected with an indirect advertisement-recommendation by means of textual, visual and audio material, so if one is interested, he/she may go deepen his/her knowledge of Lithuania or come and visit the place. In other words, the recipient is encouraged to act. The writer admits: "In this book, I wrote about Lithuania as I feel it" (Mildažytė 2011: 426). The author of the book expresses her patriotism, endless love for Lithuania, she also shows how proud she is of her homeland and seeks to encourage interest and deeper engagement into her homeland's history and culture in Lithuanians and people representing other cultures both in Lithuania and abroad.

Naturally, similar expectations are maintained concerning the translation of the book, namely, the impact on the reader maximally close to the original. However, a problem arises if it is possible to render everything fully as it was intended in the source text. People belonging to the same society recognise their cultural elements and easily communicate them to others, even though historical periods may cause some disturbances. Yet explaining them to another society that speaks a different language may appear to be an immense challenge. Intercultural differences that occur aggravate or even break communication between different cultures while the translator or / and the reader become hostages of intercultural communication if they do not know facts or misinterpret a given piece of information. A misunderstood source may turn into a misunderstood translation, and while the responsibility of the author and the content of the source text, especially its cultural dimension, plays an essential role in case of rendering the so-called culture-bound elements, it goes without saying that cultural sensitivity is an essential part of the translator's literacy. The translation in the case of culture-specific elements is understood in this article as a broad concept that represents a rendering or with other words, a transfer of cultural specificity.

According to Vlahov and Florin (1980: 47), culture-bound words or phrases define objects typical of a nation's or country's life, lifestyle, culture, social and historical development, strange to other nations. Due to the national and / or historical connotations these words do not have precise equivalents in other languages, thus they cannot be translated in a usual way and require specific solutions. In Armalytė's (1986: 5) opinion, culture-bound lexical elements form

a specific part of vocabulary which distinctly manifests the nation's material and spiritual uniqueness as well as reflects the nation's historical and cultural experience. The words that mark unique referents of a culture are familiar within their own culture and foreign in another one which may not have respective counterparts in everyday experience. However, it may only be a question of time when these words from a foreign culture enter the active vocabulary of the target language, especially considering the globally active merging of cultures.

Distinctive features of a culture-bound word become especially evident in a particular pair of languages and embrace such dimensions as own – foreign, familiar – unfamiliar, specific cultural-historical and local – regional – national connotations. The cultural distance in each pair of languages may vary. For instance, comparing the neighbouring cultures of Lithuanians and Latvians with the more distant Lithuanian and Japanese cultures whose cultural distance may be close or distant, objects and phenomena may be similar or absolutely unfamiliar due to their strangeness. Yet it may be that representatives of these cultures will pick up the English translation of the book by Edita Mildažytė *Pasimatymas su Lietuva* and having read a couple of pages will develop a wish to get better acquainted with the country, its lifestyle and specificity. Thus a clear, understandable, reader-friendly translation that still renders the style and content elements of the source text may serve as a bait for travellers, representatives of politics, culture or a business world who look for present or useful information; it may also attract emigrants of several generations who may wish to keep a part of their homeland on a shelf and introduce it to people in the new environment – friends and neighbours – or even those who wish to learn the English language. The translation is targeted at a very wide English-speaking audience (knowing that currently English has become *lingua franca* in the global world, i.e. a universal tool to spread information about various cultures). Any translation, being carried out or read, frequently activates the search for one's own cultural identity and perception. With the translation of the book being discussed in English, *Lithuania at First Sight* may be read by a native speaker as well as a Latvian or a Japanese, as each and every of them will find and (mis)interpret information according to their individual cultural experience. Therefore, the task for the translator involves not only making a text understandable, but also holding the mission to convey Lithuanian culture in the way it was designed and carried out by the author of the original text, while the reader has to decide what is left for him/her.

The intrigue of the artistic idea of the analysed book is encoded in the very title where the word *pasimatymas* 'the date' hints of the nervousness and excitement of the first meeting and a situation when a relationship only begins. The aim of the translator is not only to inform but also to creatively introduce, represent as much of the source culture-specific elements as possible while minimizing unavoidable losses and thus to introduce the uniqueness of Lithuania:

culture-bound elements. The interpretation of the text, the professional preparation and the cultural experience of the translator determines the way in which it should happen.

Edita Mildažytė's book was translated into English by the team of four people: Diana Bartkutė Barnard, Joseph Everatt, Andrius Užkalnis and Ada Mykolė Valaitis. They all know Lithuanian very well and are directly related with Lithuania being born here or having a close relation to its language and culture. Due to the large scope of the work and deadlines, not a single translator but the whole team must have been gathered. In this case, the collaboration of translators in determining the strategy, common goals and coordination of work in order to achieve consistent translation and optimal result is of crucial importance.

Translation theorists suggest various strategies that could be adopted by translators in order to deal with culture-bound linguistic elements. Venuti (1995: 20) offered the strategies of *domestication* and *foreignization* that provide both linguistic and cultural recommendations, seek for the balance between the values of the world of the author and those of the reader depending on the chosen mode of rendering. According to Pažūsis (2014: 112), the strategy of *domestication* is applied in an attempt to make the source text closer to the audience using the target language, their cultural elements, whereas *foreignization*, on the contrary, is used to retain the uniqueness of the source text. It is possible to say that the application of the *foreignization* strategy indicates of its own accord that a foreign culture is involved. The strategy has to be evaluated and organized without deviations to the extremes unless such is the aim of the translation. Absolute *foreignization* may trouble the reader of the translated text if there are no explanations provided. The loss of the cultural specificity of the source text, neutralization by means of *domestication* may cause a misleading communicative impact and inadequate associations. The translator is obligated, according to Nida (1964: 13), to process the source text and render it in the target language so that the reader of it could still feel the cultural colours and emotional equivalence of the source language. The *translation strategy* (macro solution) indicates the direction to be kept in order to find an appropriate variant to render a particular translation unit, while the solution is implemented by means of a particular *way of translation* (micro solution). That is, one or another translation strategy is applied when *domestication* seeks to adapt the strangeness of the source text and make it understandable to the audience of the target language or when, in the case of *foreignization*, one tries to retain the unit of the source text in the translation without any changes (Pažūsis 2014: 361).

While discussing the strategies of rendering culture-bound elements, Florin (1993: 127) lists criteria that have to be taken into account while rendering culture-bound words in another language: a) it is important to consider the genre of the text, b) the translator must know the target audience of the translation and predict possible losses of his translation as well as look for ways to compensate

them, c) communication between the reader and the target language will not take place if the reader does not understand the name of the transcribed culture-bound element which was given to him/her, i.e. to evaluate what knowledge potentially the reader might have.

In general, it is possible to come to a conclusion that in rendering unique words referring to nationally culture-specific elements in translation, theorists suggest retaining both their form and content, yet depending on the context and particular situation of translation the translator is free to decide which way to choose. The solution of translation can be either the mechanical transfer of a cultural element into a foreign environment or the 'sacrifice' of the form, i.e. the loss and adaptation of the content or even elimination of the lexical unit. The context gives significance to a lexical unit and provides a chance-to-be-used to maximally precisely render unique national and historical specificity. Alekseeva (2008: 31) thinks that the main meaning within the context or, in other words, their significance is of special importance in the process of translating or rendering culture specific elements in another language. The author distinguishes two types of culture-bound elements according to their significance within the context: 1. *significant culture-bound elements* – highly meaningful culture-bound elements that convey the essence of the message, 2. *insignificant culture-bound elements* – elements that do not comprise the essence of the message in the given context and is mentioned only episodically. The translation of either of the types will be oriented towards the meaning of the culture-bound lexeme within a context, for instance, when the culture-bound element is only mentioned episodically, the translator can make a decision not to emphasize insignificant details and thus choose an approximate rendering, i.e. change it with a contextual analogue also retaining an adequately communicative intention. Culture-bound elements of the second type (*insignificant culture-bound elements*) can be omitted by compensating this choice within the context, whereas the culture-bound elements of the first type (*significant culture-bound elements*) cannot be eliminated – they must be rendered while avoiding to overcrowd the text (Alekseeva 2008:32–33).

Translation techniques used to render non-equivalent lexical units are thoroughly analysed by Koller (2004: 232ff). He notices particular shortages in a number of languages.¹ In Koller's opinion, names of culture-bound elements are names of unique objects and often do not have a corresponding equivalent in another language, hence the ratio 1:0 in such a pair of languages. These shortages are only temporary in the lexical system of the target language. Every translator who consciously wishes to render names of culture-bound elements will try to fill in these gaps. In order to help to eliminate these gaps Koller (2004: 232–235)

1| Though it could be possible to talk not about shortages or gaps but about differences in systems of languages or worldviews.

offers five translation techniques: 1. *Loan* (DE Übernahme) takes place when a linguistic unit of the source language is loaned as a quote, by fully or partially loaning it to the phonetic, orthographic, morphological norms of the target language; the discussion concerns a foreign word that emphasizes authenticity and local colours so it is possible to talk about conscious foreignization. 2. *Calque* (DE *Lehnübersetzung*) – a unit of the source language is translated into the target language morphemically imitating structural significance of the source language units or by literally translating phrases. 3. *Analogue* (DE *Entsprechung*) happens when a unit of similar meaning from the target language is chosen. 4. *Explication* (DE *Explication, definitorische Umschreibung*) means that a unit of the source language is described, commented or defined in terms of the target language. 5. *Adaptation* (DE *Adaptation*) is a functional-communicative change of the source language unit, i.e. the choice of a unit of the target language which corresponds to the same function and has the same value in the target language and culture. This way is associated with the cultural assimilation of the source language text.

The first three techniques may pose some risks concerning translation of culture-bound lexical units as the reader may not fully understand them, therefore Koller (2004: 233) notes that these techniques can be combined in the target language. This is the only solution to render the new unit into the target language as precisely and reader-friendly as possible. In case of commentaries or explanations, it is suggested that the unit of the source language should be supplemented with information provided in brackets thus indicating that the case concerns a particular term or notion of the source language.

The following part of the article is related to the analysis of examples and discussion of the results of rendering names of culture-bound elements. Translation techniques follow Koller's classification (see above). Significances of the units from the source and target texts are juxtaposed.²

Examples are numbered and each number indicates a page of the source book in which the example is to be found. A Lithuanian version of a unit (LT) is given and its rendering into the English language (ENG) is provided. The examples below reveal Lithuania to the readers of both Lithuanian and English texts where translation is implemented by means of using: *loan* (when the original source language word is preserved), *calque* (when the lexical meaning is brought closer to the reader and the form of the name is partially preserved), *analogue* (when the translation moves away from the source language yet guarantees perception) and *explication* (when additional information is provided to make a culture-bound element easily understandable).

2| For this purpose *Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language* (further DLL) URL: <http://www.lkz.lt/> and *Oxford English Dictionary* (further OED) Online URL: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/> are used.

In case when a *loan* is used the following procedures of rendering the source text segment into the target text segment are applied:

- Mechanical transfer: (1) 92³, LT Šakotis – ENG Šakotis; (2) 382, LT *Morė* or *Kotrė* – ENG *Morė* or *Kotrė*; (3) 57, LT *Dzūkija* – ENG *Dzūkija*; the examples include (1) the name of a dish or (2) a variously called traditional attribute of a festival, (3) the name of an ethnocultural region. The original spelling is preserved (letters š, ė, ū). Loan allows for the acquaintance with the authentic name or at least visual perception if additional information is needed.
- Loan by changing the grammatical case of the noun: (4) 66, LT [...] *su kastiniu* [...] – [...] with *kastinys* [...]; (5) 220, LT [...] *mugėje gausu tradiciškai dažytų kiaušinių – margučių* – ENG [...] traditionally painted eggs – *margučiai*; (4) the name of a Lithuanian dish or (5) a traditional attribute of Easter celebration are both provided with minimal changes, i.e. the grammatical case of the word is changed. The Lithuanian language has 7 grammatical cases, whereas Modern English uses 3, and in order to make the target text maximally understandable for the reader, the standard grammatical form of singular (4) or plural (5) in the nominative case with diacritical signs retained is chosen.

When the *calque* is used as a translation technique used to render culture-bound elements, the following procedures ways are employed:

- Literal translation of a phrase: (6) 165, LT *Trys kryžiai* – ENG *Three Crosses*; (6) the name of the monument is given and presented as a proper name.
- Literal translation with a change of the word order. 7) 77, LT *Vilko vaikai* – ENG *The Children of the Wolf*. The expression of dependence in Lithuanian is manifested in the genitive case, whereas in English, a prepositional construction is used. The proposed neologism may also vary, which is shown in the translation of the film title *Wolfschildren* on the Cineuropa website⁴
- Morphematic translation by changing the morphemes of the source language compound into separate words in the target language or supplementing the components: (8) 366, LT *Aguonpienis* – ENG *Poppy seed milk*. Lithuanian compound is made of two components [*aguon*|*pienis*], in English it is given as a phrase of three lexical units – *poppy seed milk*, i.e. the explanation of the technology as to what is the origin of the product, though maybe *poppy milk* might be sufficient. Even though the context is unambiguous enough, there is an attempt made here to avoid multiple meanings.
- Translation of one component and lexical-semantic change of another by drawing it closer to the understanding of the purpose: (9) 108, LT *alkakalniai* – ENG

3| The paper also uses examples collected by Karolina Danisaukaite.

4| URL: <https://cineuropa.org/en/film/242404/>.

sacred hills; (13) 119, LT *piliakalniai* – ENG *defensive mounds*. The components of the compound are translated separately: the first one is substituted by a synonym, i.e. the reader is acquainted with the function of the object, the translation of the second component [-*kalniai*] informs about the category of the object.

The strategy of *analogue* might be applied in the following way:

- ▶ A unit of similar meaning from the target language is chosen: (10) 260, LT *Tarškynės* – ENG *Rattles*. (DLL) suggests such significances of the word *Tarškynės*: a) *sukamas tarškantis prietaisas signalizuoti*, b) *lietuvių liaudies muzikos instrumentą, sudarytą iš medinių rėmų, lentelių ir velenėlio*, while (OED) defines *Rattles* as *a wooden device that makes a loud noise when whirled around, formerly used by spectators at football matches*. It is not mentioned here that *Rattles* is a musical instrument, yet according to the noise it makes and the mechanism of its operation this device is similar to *Tarškynės*. Thus translation opens a possibility to understand what kind of device it is and its principle of work.
- ▶ The substitution of the culture-bound element by an analogue or a lexical equivalent: (11) 228, LT *Margučiai* – ENG *Easter Eggs*. In this case, the difference between the two solutions can be observed; compare 1b (5) when possibly different translators rendered the unit differently: one with the original source name, the other – as a simple analogue without any additional explanations.
- ▶ Generic-specific change: (12) 59, LT *Nuometas* – ENG a *headscarf* [...]. Here the reader in the target language gets acquainted with the category of the object, while the picture beside the text, i.e. a visual channel, supplements the perception of the specifics of the source unit.
- ▶ Substitution by a contextual analogue: (13) 15, LT [...] *po cepelinų spalvos dangumi* [...] – ENG [...] under *ash-coloured skies* [...]. A very interesting contextual analogue is applied in this case. The author of the book, while talking about the climate in Lithuania and grey clouds commonly covering the skies, chooses a metaphor and compares it to the colour of *cepelinai* (*cepelinai* is a culture-bound element – a popular traditional dish, dumplings made from ground potatoes with some filling). Meanwhile, in the translation, this playful comparison of colours is substituted by a variant that might be clearer and more perceptible to the reader, namely, *ash-coloured skies*. The translator has evaluated the culture-bound element, assessed its contextual importance and decided not to mention the colour of *cepelinai* as the traditional dish is only mentioned here due to its specific colour. The translator maintains metaphorical expression and renders the comparison with the phrase *ash-coloured*, though he/she could have neutralized it by only indicating the colour: *grey sky*. One can only enjoy the creativity of the translator.

Explication (additional information is provided to make a culture-bound element easily understandable) has been used in the following way, i.e. by indicating the place of the event: (14) 258, LT *tremtis* – ENG *Siberian Exile*. The special connotation of the source language word *tremtis* that has acquired the status of a historically culture-bound element is rendered by specifying this historical event, namely, the exile to the Siberia. This indirect meaning is obvious for those in the source culture.

The ways of translation might be combined together to give more information to the reader. For instance, a loan might be accompanied by an explanation (the source name is retained, yet additional information about the culture-bound element is provided): the traditional nature of the festival or the dish is emphasized: (15) 366, LT *Kūčios* – ENG *Kūčios*, the customary Christmas Eve celebration; (16) 135, LT *Šimtalapis* – ENG *šimtalapis*, an especially popular sweet dish. The original name of the festival is adopted, and the time of its celebration is given additionally, while the lexeme *customary* emphasizes the tradition even more. The traditional nature in the case of the dish is emphasized by using the phrase *especially popular*.

In other cases, a calque might be accompanied by an explanation. The peculiarity of the action being carried out is indicated: (17) 48,279 LT – *Knygnešystė* – ENG *Book smuggling*. This is an interesting case of rendering a culture-bound element. The translator does not translate the compound [Knyg|nešystė] morphemically, as, for instance, a *book carrier*, but chooses a word pointing to a more precise significance of the component instead, i.e. *smuggle* which means *move (goods) illegally into or out of a country (OED)* and thus *book smuggling* is formed. This culture-bound element comes from the period of the junction of the 19th-20th centuries; DLL defines a person who undertakes this business as *spaudos draudimo metu užsienyje spausdintų knygų gabentojas per sieną ir platinimas*.

In order to render a source culture-bound element, its uniqueness and importance to the reader in the most reader-friendly way is sometimes insufficient to use a single translation technique. A possible solution of this problem might be various combinations of the different translation techniques used to it into another language.

Conclusions

There are many ways of rendering names of culture-bound elements. It concerns not only the text, pair of languages, direction of translation but the translator as well for it is he/she who will choose particular ways or strategies of the translation: he/she may rely on domestication to draw the source text closer to the target language or rather lean towards foreignization to retain more of the source text uniqueness.

The author of the book analysed in the present paper intended to render the peculiarities and uniqueness of Lithuania by referring to various culture-bound elements. Therefore, it is possible to say that the name of a culture-bound element is an inseparable part of the work. The book would not fulfil its purpose without the culture-bound elements so the translator is obligated to take this intention into account and render it in the translation.

Translation is expected to incite interest in another culture; this interest grows along with the original word, an impressive photo or a fluent translation of the text. The more elements of the source culture are preserved in the translation, the more perception of the culture and the source text depends on the preparation of the reader.

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