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Cutting Edge Culture for Novice Translators

Summary

The article briefly explores the rationale for requiring certain types of activities from novice translation students. Three groups of such activities are presented: imitation, analysis and application, each followed by a brief discussion of its effectiveness when used with first-year students in the Translation Programme at the Pedagogical Faculty, University of Maribor.

Key words: intercultural studies, translation exercises

Kulturne vsebine za prevajalce začetnike

Povzetek

Prispevek oriše nekatere vrste dejavnosti, s katerimi se seznanjajo slušatelji na začetku prevajalskega programa Pedagoške fakultete Univerze v Mariboru. V ospredju so tri vrste dejavnosti: posnemanje, razčlemba ter uporaba, ki jim sledi krajša obravnava učinkovitosti.

Ključni pojmi: medkulturne študije, vaje iz prevajanja

Cutting Edge Culture for Novice Translators

1. Introduction

Pint, Dave?

Bitter, please.

Bangers with that?

No, ta, chippie tea for me and the missus today.

The instruction accompanying the above exercise in cultural detail reads “Who are these people and what are they talking about?” It forms part of material designed for the first year class in Intercultural Studies at the University of Maribor. Dense with cultural specifics, it might have been enigmatic to students in October, but by May should have become transparent, as they dip into the reservoir of culture from English speaking countries.

In designing instructional material for such novice translators, we were guided by an awareness of the complexities of this vast cultural area and by the conviction that, as Douglas Robinson says, “... the more aware the translator can become of these complexities... the better a translator s/he will be” (Robinson 1977, 222).

We decided at the outset to limit our coverage to the aspects of culture found in verbal language and, to some extent, pictures. Cultural differences carried in behaviour (for example, whether to shake hands or kiss the cheek) remained in the background in these first two semesters. Although not committed to a position that language is the only cultural carrier, we nevertheless felt that beginning translators should concentrate on the medium of language while learning to mine its “cultural deposits” (Newmark 1988, 95) rather than fall into its cultural traps.

Our course was designed around four broad principles: exposure, imitation, analysis and application. The first, exposure, occurred continuously throughout the two semesters, in the form of written material, videos, pictures and student oral presentations. Material was selected to represent each of the major English-speaking cultures of the world: British, American, Canadian and Australian. Student oral presentations concentrated on general knowledge about the target culture (holidays, measurements, history, famous people, etc.) and on hot spots of cultural difference that produce interpretive difficulties in written texts (for example, governmental vocabulary). Popular culture per se (movies, pop music, music videos) was not extensively covered, on the theory that these things are more readily available, and that there are other areas with which a first-year student is in greater need of familiarity.

The remaining three principles – imitation, analysis and application – each centered on a specific type of student learning activity designed to complement the exposure to cultural material. We will consider, in turn, the rationale behind these three principles and connect this to examples of the kinds of exercises chosen for their implementation.

2. Imitation activities

This principle accompanied early lessons in the diction, tone, style, register, voice, structure and genre of various kinds of English prose. Students also learned some principles of English poetry – meter, rhyme, sound effects – conventions of its presentation – capitalized, left-justified line openings – and studied examples of both popular and canonical poetry in English. In all cases, the study of a text was followed by an exercise in imitating that text. We began with an exercise that I found in the British Council’s excellent publication, *Creative Ways*. The first half of Suniti Namjoshi’s fable, “The Bride”, was presented to the class, who were asked to provide a suitable ending to the fable, using the correct diction, tone and register and observing the conventions of the genre. In order to catch the correct style, students had to make precise diction choices, observe the formal register and ironic tone and demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate conventions.

In another exercise, students read Jamaica Kincaid’s very short story, “Girl,” and then were asked to imitate its form, but to alter its context to Slovenia. Kincaid’s story¹ is a series of instructions, from a mother to daughter, which accumulate to reveal a portrait of both the mother- daughter relationship as well as the whole social, economic and even political culture on a small West Indian island. In transposing the story from one culture to another, students had to find what was integral to their own, and to represent that in the everyday discourse between generations. Results revealed the value of this activity, as they compiled a highly revelatory portrait of Slovene intergenerational relations.

I learned several things while assigning and correcting these exercises. First, that the chosen original stories must be brief. They should not be excerpts. Secondly, great literature seemed to have a shortage of the right kind of story. Faulkner Joyce, Updike – these were not good choices for first year students to imitate – to read, yes, but not to imitate. Better choices for student imitation are more contemporary efforts, such as magazine stories, or even amateur stories, the kind that can be found on websites devoted to genre writing.

In order to sharpen the novice translator’s ear for sound and rhythm, I had them read some standard English poetry, including sonnets and ballads. A simple poem in quatrains, with one word removed from each stanza started them off on a career as poetry imitators and writers. On their first day in *Intercultural Studies 1*, they filled in the blanks in H. Tham’s “Offerings” (another fine suggestion from the British Council publication). I then removed more of the lines and asked for further creativity. Finally, students were assigned to write their own “offerings” poems, following a similar progression through four stanzas of wooing by various offerings. Students were encouraged to alter the metaphor from Tham’s original one of flowers to something else. Some chose food as their offering, some precious stones – one even expressed love in varieties of chocolate.

1 “Girl” was first published on June 26, 1978 in the *New Yorker*, and subsequently in the collection, *At the Bottom of the River* 1983.

Another assignment of this type involved writing a response to a Renaissance sonnet (“One day I wrote her name upon the strand” by Edmund Spenser) from a woman’s point of view. Another asked them to change the metaphor in Campion’s poem “There is a garden in her face.” In student hands, Campion’s extended metaphor “There is a garden in her face,/ Where roses and white lilies grow”, metamorphosed into “There is a garden in his face,/ Where red peppers and white radishes grow, ” and “There is a garden in his face,/ Where birds of different species nest.” All metaphors are to some extent culturally embedded, so choosing a new metaphor gives insight into the working of metaphor in the language under study. Additionally, observing the rules of scansion, meter and rhyme challenges the ear of these students, and makes them pay attention to aspects of word selection that go beyond meaning. This is a necessary skill for a good translator, or for any translator who wishes to see beyond the first entry in the dictionary.

In testing this skill, I avoided difficult poetry and chose instead something more modern than Renaissance sonnets, and verse rather than serious poetry. In all cases I looked for poetry with a clear metrical pattern for the student to follow, a unified diction field, clear voice and register, and if possible, a theme that unfolds to a predictable pattern over the course of the poem. “My Heart Soars” by the Chief Dan George, a native Canadian, proved ideal for this exercise, with its strong pattern of simple, sensory images from nature. It is not necessary to be a poet to do these exercises well; more important is that ability to pay close attention to the cues – in verb endings, in plurals, in pronouns, in matching rhymes, in parallel sound effects and in syllable patterning – that signal the direction and meaning of a poem. Under test conditions students were given the opening lines of Jessie Pope’s “Noise,” which begins “I like noise” and continues through a regular pattern of assorted, beloved sounds (Pope 1981, 51). In response to the instruction to add about six more lines, one student produced this effort:

*The clap of the hand, the squeal of a mouse,
The crash of a car hitting a house,
The cry of a child, the clamour of bells,
The clatter of crabs breaking their shells,
The shout of a man, the silence of a tree,
The shriek of a person who wants to be free. (M. L.)*

3. Analysis activities

While students are already practicing skills of literary analysis in the exercises above, they also need to look at texts that highlight a more purely contemporary cultural semiosis. This kind of analysis is best performed on target language material such as jokes, cartoons and advertisements where dense nodes of cultural trivia cluster. In this area, our students were initially overconfident of their cultural knowledge. After all, they had been exposed to British culture in the textbooks from which they had been learning English for years, and to American culture on the television screen.

It was necessary, then to add an element of discomfort in their position *vis à vis* English speaking culture. I chose a quiz, carefully designed to roam across cultural space in Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia. Students were asked to collaborate in pairs on the quiz; I did not want any one student's particular knowledge gap to become too apparent in public. The type of question is well represented by this one from the realm of American politics: "Hillary Clinton is now a Senator, but is she in Congress?"

I composed this question by including an item I thought that all should recognize – the name of Hillary Clinton – plus another well known fact, her successful run for the Senate seat in New York. But the kicker was the Congress question. Did students know enough about the structure of American government to be able to say with certainty that the Senate was one part of Congress? On the whole, they didn't. Hillary Clinton is certainly in Congress, as are all senators, but my students, raised on episodes of *West Wing*, either didn't know this or weren't sure about it.

The course relied on student oral presentations about such areas of cultural focus (Newmark 1988, 94) to identify and fill in any knowledge gaps. Armed anew with facts about government, law, crime, currencies, personalities, measurements, historical events and geographical basics, students were better equipped to analyze the seemingly simple codes of contemporary humour.

Humour is often said to be culture specific and not to translate at all well. Setting aside for the moment the matter of taste in humour, there is the more manageable matter of humour that relies on culture specific data, stereotypes and catchphrases. I began from the assumption that we could not teach our students everything they would need to know to understand every *New Yorker* cartoon, but that they could at least learn when they needed to behave like real translators and Look It Up.

Take the cartoon of a Bear and a Bull in bed together in an atmosphere of post-coital familiarity. Students were shown the cartoon without a caption and asked to guess what was going on. Then facts about the New York stock market and its animal symbols were presented and students were asked again to guess at an appropriate caption. Finally, it was revealed that the original caption was "Sure, it was good for us, but what about the market?" This cartoon's whole effect depended on a specific item of culturally embedded semiosis. Without that knowledge, this appeared to be a piece of rather crude sexual humour, based on miscegenation among the animal kingdom.

Another test of this analytical type also required a special bit of cultural knowledge, namely the fact that the Oval Office is in the White House and is identified with the President of the United States and his staff. The cartoon shows two important-looking men coming out of a massive doorway. One says to the other in a private remark, "How long has the Oval Office had a mirror on the ceiling?" The class had been studying the terminology surrounding the

American presidency, so any alert student should have recognized the words *Oval Office*. Only a better-read, more culturally aware student, however, would have gone on to see the reference to the Clinton presidency and its on-site scandals. Cartoons such as these provide excellent practice and testing grounds for cultural trivia, some of which is not so trivial – after all, the term *Oval Office* can be used metonymically in Washington news reporting to indicate the current President and his executive staff.

After the class had worked together on such cartoons, I then assigned them to find a cartoon from their own culture and to explain its meaning to an outsider. This exercise, called Reverse Cultural Awareness, proved to be invaluable in heightening their awareness of just how deep the cultural traps could be for the unwary. After all, when it came to the American or Canadian cartoons, they had only my word for the extensive sub-surface symbolic systems that they were in danger of missing; however, as soon as they found themselves trying to explain a satirical cartoon about Primož Peterka, Milan Kučan or Miss Slovenia Universe, they took control of the semiosis and began to see its opacity to outsiders. One clever example was a simple caricature line drawing of a small figure in an outsize cowboy hat who is holding out his hand to a hatless figure and saying “Wellcome [sic] King of Slovakia”. Though this was a cartoon from a Slovene publication, the words were in English, since the small figure was obviously the American President. The joke turned on two bits of cultural trivia: the international tendency to confuse Slovenia with Slovakia (intensely annoying to Slovenes), and the current American President’s lack of geographical and historical savvy. Similar exercises invite students to extend their cultural explorations by showing them how much there is to be missed if they do not. In applying these types of cartoon exercises I have found that it is best to have students working in groups. Two or three heads are better than one, and it is unwise to leave a student feeling stumped or completely excluded from enigmatic cartoons that simply aren’t funny. Reverse Cultural Awareness is a vital component of this exercise, and I am working on extending this to other types of activity.

In the area of Analysis, we did similar exercises with written jokes of various types. My assistant, Tomaž Onič, developed an exercise with Knock-knock jokes that was particularly challenging for the students, but very rewarding in its results. Many jokes turn on word play, and so require careful attention to the potential for doubleness of meaning. E-mail is a source for endless jokes; I found this one in my in-box one morning and immediately determined to use it.

NEW WING

Recently, when a Panel of Doctors at our local hospital was asked to vote on adding a new wing, this is what happened:

The allergists voted to scratch it.

The dermatologists preferred no rash moves.

The gastroenterologists had a gut feeling about it.

The neurologists thought the administration had a lot of nerve.

The obstetricians stated they were laboring under a misconception.

And so on for several more lines. I liked its combination of verbal challenges for the novice translator. First, there was the matter of the names for various medical specializations and their practitioners – a great opportunity for dictionary work. Second there was the play on words in each doctor’s answer. Each reply was geared to the doctor’s specialization, and involved an idiomatic phrase which punned on some activity from that doctor’s field. The challenge for students was to decide whether, or to what extent, this joke was translatable and to suggest ways of imitating its humour in Slovene.

Advertisements also provided material combining verbal complexity with cultural specifics. Once again, students tended to be overconfident about their ability to understand the slogans from English advertisements. We did a class exercise in groups, where each group received a plastic folder containing five or six magazine ads. The assignment was to talk about the ads and find one that was easily translatable, and one that was challenging and to present these two to the class at large. Many double meanings went unspotted; many cultural items went unidentified. What is *Saks*? *Bloomingdale’s*? *Rigor mortis*? Whose martinis need to be shaken not stirred? Once again, the best part of this exercise was the subsequent Reverse Cultural Awareness. Students found advertisements from Slovene magazines and tried to translate the captions into English (in some cases, back into English). There were mistakes, of course. One student confidently proclaimed that a given brand of coffee was “Coffee that spoils.” She hadn’t checked the difference in meaning between the forms of the verb and had gone for *to spoil* instead of *to be spoiled* (as in pampered), which the ad’s images of leisure clearly called for. Another advertised a hair care product by claiming that it was for women who were “vaccinated for healthy hair.” In this case an idiom from one language was simply assumed to work identically in the other, with hilarious results. A more successful, literary example concerned Slovenia’s best-known poet, Prešeren, whose face appears on the 1000 tolar note. A company promoting investment used a facsimile of the note bearing Prešeren’s well-known face in order to pun on his name. To the student who spotted and presented this untranslatable cultural allusion, it will forever be clear just how impenetrable an ordinary allusion can be to one outside the cultural inner circle.

In testing this skill, I tried to choose visually simple ads that relied heavily on a short slogan for effect. One good example was a magazine ad for a specialized type of bicycle. Above a picture of a smart bicycle was a two line slogan: “Designed to Cruise. Priced to Fly.” The prices quoted made it clear that the buyer would get a substantial discount on the purchase of two bicycles. What I wanted students to see was the special multiple meanings of *cruise* and *fly*, which are simultaneously two modes of locomotion and two travel preferences (one more luxurious than the other). *Fly* also functions in the non-literal meaning of *fly off the shelf*, indicating the likelihood that the bargain will be irresistible to many customers. Here are three examples of student translations that capture the slogan’s meaning and connotations to a greater or lesser extent:

Oblikovan za vožnjo. Cena za vzletet.
Narejen za križarjenja. Vreden letenja.
Izdelek za izlet. Cena za polet.

The exercise can present just as much difficulty when working from Slovene media into English (for example, the recent headline *Keks v mestu*). I was constantly aware, nevertheless, that this type of exercise approaches the outer boundaries of intercultural studies, where cultural knowledge meets linguistic flexibility. Throughout the course, in fact, it proved nearly impossible to separate cultural from linguistic translation in any meaningful way.

4. Application activities

Having exposed our students to a deluge of cultural information and new vocabulary in various cultural focuses, we wanted them to discover that such knowledge is useless if it cannot be applied. The creative skills that we rewarded in the Imitation exercises are only part of the skill range these students need; accuracy in identifying culture-bound items is equally important, perhaps even more important. One study of translation ability in the US divided its measurements into areas of Accuracy and Expression and concluded that “[a]ccuracy appears to be the more valid measure for translator ability” (Stansfield 1992, 461). We used magazine, newspaper and Internet articles, essays and short stories for demonstrating the necessity of applying newly acquired vocabulary. However, the volume of such material needed in order to generate a sufficient number of the targeted cultural items was too great for our students to read in two semesters. It was necessary to design some of this material myself in a more compact form.

Working with students’ new vocabulary and concept sets, I generated passages dense in culturally allusive items, to all of which the students had been exposed. One example of this kind of exercise is the English Pub scene that opens this article. By the end of the course, students should be able to recognize pint, bitter, bangers, ta, tea and chippie, and should then be able to guess missus from the context. Other passages were seeded with parliamentary vocabulary, the terminology of the American Congress, current university jargon, references to particular culturally iconic sites (Niagara Falls, Ayers Rock, Stratford-on-Avon, Graceland etc.). Here is another example of this kind of Cultural Potpourri, useful for group or pair work in class as well as for testing of accuracy at the end of the course:

So you think the bill will be tabled?

Nah, not a chance – the Whip has everyone coming in – the boss wants no absentees on this big one.

Well, I sure would hate to see it die on the order paper. But the opposition could filibuster.

So, can they get it through before recess? The fiscal year is ending too. The ayes want to get back to their ridings as much as anyone.

You in the lock-up?

Nah – just the gallery.

Initially I worried about the artificiality of these texts, believing that the best training material is taken directly from the real world of the target culture. However, I decided finally that the requirement for density and specificity of allusion for testing purposes excused this fabrication.

Each of the passages is plausible as a set of real-life utterances, although their total level of ellipsis and idiomatic expression would be unusual.

5. Conclusion

Students need to be made into life-long cultural sponges if they are to be excellent translators. Although there are few effective short cuts to expertise in the target culture, a course such as *Intercultural Studies 1* can help in three ways: first, by exposing students to basic cultural facts that they should know. (Yes, the Senate and the House of Representatives are both part of the American Congress. No, Ned Kelly is not a pop star, but a notorious Australian outlaw and folk hero.) Second, by teaching them skills of close attention to textual detail and form in the culture's literary and media genres, so that their translation choices can go beyond the mere matching of dictionary meanings. (So, if the register of this passage is formal and the subject agriculture, the right noun choice would be *produce* rather than *stuff*.) And third, by habituating them to caution in approaching cultural matters. Can they, in other words, sense that the word *Lockerbie*, used in a contemporary media report is not just a place name but a metonym for a terrorist act? A student who has taken and profited from *Intercultural Studies 1* should have learned that the meaning of such a cultural item cannot be assumed to be either unimportant or straightforward.

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