Transformation of Semiotic Culture Codes in English and German Translations of M. Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita

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Abstract: The article deals with the study of semiotic culture codes presented in The Master and Margarita by M. Bulgakov and its translations into English and German. The paper highlights the correlation between transformation and elimination of codes in translating microcontexts that express “Torn off buttons on the coat” and “Attitude to somebody else’s property” semiotic culture codes as they characterize the mentality of a Soviet man in the 1930s. The study proves that the author of the Source Text and the translators of English and German Target Texts consider these codes as equivalent but not fully identical.

Key words: English and German translations of The Master and Margarita by M. Bulgakov · Transformation of semiotic culture codes · Culturonym

INTRODUCTION

The central issue of recent studies in translating is exploring semiotic and cultural aspects of the text of literary translation [1; 58; 2; 67; 3; 5; 4; 49; 5; 52-54; 6; 22; 7; 15 et al.]. The tendency fits into present-day research agenda as any literary work reflects the culture of the source language (SL) and along with factual explicit information conveys implicit semiotic codes of the SL that “provide a framework within which signs make sense: they are interpretative devices which are used by interpretative communities” [8]. Verbal representatives of semiotic culture codes in a text are culturonyms. It is claimed that translation “reduces the foreign, the reading of translated texts is deprived of the opportunity of experiencing something different” [9: 28]. The assignment of a translator is to decipher the codes so as to gain transparency of the Target Text (TT) to the representative of a different linguoculture.

The present study is concerned with the analysis of a number of excerpts from the novel The Master and Margarita by M. Bulgakov and its translated versions in English (translated by Michael Glenny in 1967 and Hugh Aplin in 2008) and in German (by German translators Thomas Reschke in 1968 and Eric Boerner in 2012). The primary purpose of the paper is to analyze transformations of semiotic culture codes “Torn off buttons on the coat” and “Attitude to somebody else’s property” on the assumption they characterize the mentality of a Soviet man in the 1930s in target languages (TL).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We employ a method that presents a combination of semiotic interpretation of the TT followed up by categorizing the selected culturonyms according to culture codes (at the stage of collecting information), hermeneutical analysis of conceptual meaning with specified semiotic culture codes that are identified with Soviet mentality attributes in its interpretation by English and German translators (at the stage of processing the data), examining dictionary entries and linguocultural materials related to the epoch depicted by M. Bulgakov (at the stage of verifying the data).

Our conclusions concerning the adequacy of creating the image of Soviet man mentality in Bulgakov’s novel The Master and Margarita by English and German translators are verified through the reference to:

- Russian literary language explanatory dictionaries that contain linguocultural notes specifying peculiar features of a lexical nominant of a culturonym in a sociocultural customary reference typical of the epoch described by M. Bulgakov;

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• Literary works of other authors contemporary with M. Bulgakov and documentary books by later authors;
• Informants-representatives of Soviet communication culture of the period in question;
• Target versions of other literary works of M. Bulgakov’s contemporaries that depicted similar phenomena typical of Soviet people’s life.

Analysis: The semiotic culture code can be conveyed in M. Bulgakov’s novel as implicit hidden meaning that co-exists with explicit meaning in one and the same utterance and the one that is supposed to be interpreted by receptor. These are language units contained in the text that reveal implicit information.

The passage below exemplifies the case in which the subtext is expressed by means of semiotic code rendering such minor detail, as it could seem at first sight, as Torn off buttons on the coat:

• Через четверть часа после того, как она покинула меня, ко мне в окно постучали...
• Да, так вот. в половине января, ночью, в том же самом пальто, но уже с оторваными пуговицами. я ждал от холода в моем дворике. [10: 148]
• “A quarter of an hour after she left me there was a knock on my window…”
• “Yes and so, in mid-January, at night, in the same overcoat, but with the buttons torn off, I was huddled against the cold in my little yard”. [11: 149]

• ‘A quarter of an hour after she had left me there came a knock at my window…’
• ‘Yes, so there I stood, out in my little yard, one night in the middle of January, wearing the same overcoat but without any buttons now and I was freezing with cold’. [12: 171-172]

• “Eine Viertelstunde, nachdem sie mich verlassen hatte, klopfte man bei mir ans Fenster…”
• “Ja, also, Mitte Januar, nachts, im selben Mantel, doch mit abgerissenen Knöpfen, krümmte ich mich vor Kälte in meinem kleinen Hof”. [13: 162-163]

• “Eine Viertelstunde, nachdem sie mich verlassen hatte, klopfte es bei mir ans Fenster…”

Four months passed since somebody had knocked on the door of Master’s apartment and the January morning when right in the same coat he came back to his courtyard. In the context of sociopolitical situation of the epoch depicted in M. Bulgakov’s novel it is obvious that the character was being kept in the Gulag. But due to the tabooed character of the topic at that time the author does not express it in an explicit way. Subtext information about the Master’s stay in the Gulag is conveyed through the semiotic code “Torn off buttons on the coat”. It is known that in Soviet forced camps the buttons were usually torn off from the prisoner’s clothes. Consequently, the fact that the Master came back home after quite long-term absence and without buttons on his coat is the evidence that he stayed at some place of imprisonment. In Soviet prisons inmates were deprived of buttons on their clothes and there are some references to it in passages from novels by Gulag’s historiographer A. Solzhenitsyn:

The prisoner had already been deprived of all rights when they cut off his buttons on the threshold of State Security and he couldn't avoid a stretch [15: 291].

It is obvious that a foreigner will fail to decode this implicit information. The passage should be supplied with some explanatory commentary to decode the semiotic culture code. Besides, an English translator M. Glenny failed to render such a relevant scheme of the code as ‘The use of violence to the character’. The translation equivalent employed by the translator – ‘without any buttons’ – just states that the object is missing. But the expression in the ST ‘c оторваными пуговицами’ (“with buttons torn off”) and its equivalent in German ‘mitabgerissenen Knöpfen’ imply that the Master was subjected to the influence of the third party. So it is reasonable to conclude that the semiotic culture code is expressed in a more precise way in H. Aplin’s version and in German translation versions of The Master and Margarita than in the English version by M. Glenny. According to English and German native speakers that participated in our survey the fact that the scheme ‘The use of violence to the character’ is actualized in three out of four given target passages under consideration does not ensure the decoding of linguoculturological information about the prison and the arrest. Informants associate the missing buttons on the clothes with vagrancy and asocial behavior of the character.
Let us consider some other examples of everyday situations in interpersonal communication of Soviet people that are described in M. Bulgakov’s novel. The translation of these passages in English and in German reveals differences in mentalities of the nations that take part in translational communication. People who lived on the territory of the former USSR had a special attitude to property as it was not owned by any particular person that time. The property was public and nobody’s at the same time, i.e. official or public.

Ushakov’s Dictionary of Russian literary language gives the following definitions of the word ‘казенный’ (‘official’, ‘public’):

- One that has something to do with the Treasury, publicly owned;
- Formal, bureaucratic;
- Not notable, common, stereotypical, without any originality [16: 1282].

This is how English and German translators rendered the nomination of exclusively Soviet type of property:

- Машину зря гоняет казенную! – швабрёдничая и кот. жуя гриб. [10: 85].
- “He misuses an official car!” the cat snitched on him, chewing a mushroom [11: 83].
- ‘Drives around in a free car!’ said the cat slanderously, chewing a mushroom [12: 100].

No doubt the ST conveys the first dictionary meaning of the lexeme ‘казенный’ (‘official’, ‘public’). It is likely that the lexicographers that compiled the dictionaries at the Soviet period omitted the contemptuous shade of meaning inherent in the nomination for ideological reasons.

While choosing the equivalent for the word in question English and German translators (H. Aplin and E. Boerner) follow the semantic definition provided by dictionaries in the source language. They view it, first of all, as property owned by the state (‘an official car’ / ‘Rädchen im Staatsgetriebe’). Rendering the word combination ‘казенная машина’ M. Glenny and T. Reschke to ‘free car’ / ‘der Dienstwagen’. The attribute ‘казенная’ (‘public’) is supplied with a less formal English equivalent ‘free’ (literally speaking: ‘a free of charge car’) and a German one ‘Dienst-‘ (literally speaking: ‘service car’). Here the semantic compression takes place as the lexeme is deprived of a shade of formality. Due to this fact the TT does not verbally express such feature of mentality typical of a Russian man in Soviet times as estrangement and disregard for everything that is not privately owned. Besides, M. Glenny’s version of the text does not make it clear why the use of ‘a free car’ (‘бесплатной машины’) is reprehensible.

It should be noted that so far there is no communicatively adequate way to render the semiotic code in point. If we consider English and German versions of literary works by contemporaries of M. Bulgakov we will come across similar loose equivalents of the word ‘казенный’ (‘official’, ‘public’):


Когда-то, в царские времена, мебелировка присутствующих мест производилась по трафарету. Выращена особая порода казенной мебели… [19: 241] – A long time ago, in the days the tsar, the furnishing of public places was standartized. A special pedigree of official furniture was bred. [17: 8] – Früher, unter Zaren, waren Amtsstuben nach Schema möbliert worden. Man hatte eigens eine Rasse vom ärarischen Möbel gezüchtet [19: 14-15].

Here Ch. Malamuth, a Russian emigrant who translated I. Ilf and Y. Petrov, in one case employed the same equivalent as H. Aplin – ‘official’. As we have already noted it does not fully render the implied connotation. In a different case the translator opted for ‘government’ (literally speaking: ‘official’, ‘state’) though it cannot be extrapolated to fictional background in Bulgakov’s passage. It is obvious there is no refential identity. Though S. Likhodeyev, the character who makes the remark, holds an executive position he has no right to dispose of official, governmental transport. Most likely the matter in the novel concerns the property of variety theatre run by the character. So the analysis of translated passages from a literary work containing the same sociocultural realities as in The Master and Margarita
was not efficient in identifying a more communicatively adequate equivalent to render the semiotic culture code conveyed by the lexeme ‘казенный’ (‘official’, ‘public’) than in M. Glenny’s and H. Aplin’s versions.

In the passage given above, T. Reschke who translated both M. Bulgakov and I. Ilf and Y. Petrov employs some other equivalents of the lexeme ‘казенный’ (‘official’, ‘public’) that seem significantly specific in cultural and semiotic aspects. We have already touched upon weak and strong points of the equivalent with ‘staat’ root and we would like to analyze the ‘äarisch’ equivalent in more detail. This lexeme originates from Latin and it has a limited sphere of use in German as regards the stylistic aspect (the style of official documents, the substyle of legal documents) and the territorial aspect (Austriazismus). The explanatory dictionary of foreign words Langenscheidt marks ‘äarisch’ as a derived word from a noun ‘Ärar’ meaning 1. ‘Staatschatt’, ‘Staatsvermögen’ 2. ‘Fiskus’, ‘Staatskasse’ 3. ‘Staatsarchiv’ [20]. The e-corpus of the German language of the XX c. offers the following typical context revealing the functioning of the lexeme in question:

Überhaupt ist die äarische Schreibtischausstattung mit den vielen Stempeln,Federhaltern und Tintenfaß,die das Gewand des Ärmelschonerbedürftigen bedrohte, durch den reinlichen PC abgelüst worden… [21].

So the lexeme ‘äarisch’ can refer to furniture (see the contexts in Digitaales Wörterbuchdeutschen Sprachedes 20. Jahrhunderts). But the referential content is just a reference to a particular form of property, not emotional and evaluative connotations immanent in the Russian lexeme ‘kazennyi’ (‘official’, ‘public’). Therefore the analysis of a German version of a literary work after I. Ilf and Ye. Petrov, similar to M. Bulgakov’s novel as regards the period of creation and subject matter, failed to identify a more communicatively adequate equivalent of the word ‘казенный’ (‘official’, ‘public’) as compared with versions submitted by T. Reschke and E. Boerner.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of the study highlight that adequate decoding of semiotic culture codes and selecting their equivalents in the TL and culture in Russian-English and Russian-German translation of The Master and Margarita by M. Bulgakov is a relevant condition for producing a communicatively equivalent TT focused on the target culture mentality. The semiotic culture codes that reveal the mentality of a Soviet man in 1930s – “Torn off buttons on the coat” and “Attitude to somebody else’s property” – show in most cases these codes are viewed by the author of the source text (ST) and English and German translators as equivalent but not completely identical.

It is essential that many losses in rendering implicit information that characterizes the mentality of a Soviet man in The Master and Margarita by M. Bulgakov stem from objective reasons. The key preconditions are systemic interlingual differences, asymmetry of culture realities and stylistic norms. But transformations of semiotic culture codes in question also result from subjective factors, i.e. the capability of a translator to adequately decode the intentions implied by the author of the ST.

Findings: Present-day globalization results in rapprochement between peoples. The bounds and differences fade away together with traditions and everyday life items and the words that denote them. Culturological aspect in translatology is explicitly claimed to be relevant nowadays. Linguoculturological, communicative paradigm is the dominating one in current translatology studies: the same words are interpreted by representatives of different cultures in different ways, to say nothing of divergence in reality. Language peculiarities are closely related to the mentality of a people. These features become most obvious in critical ambivalent historical epochs and the epoch of socialism development in the USSR depicted in the novel by M. Bulgakov is one of them.

Our study proves that the mentality of a people and the peculiarities of its vision find their reflection in literary works. The language specifies feelings and associations in language signs denoting culture realia – culturonyms that explicitly reveal semiotic culture codes. It is the translation of the words related to culture that poses challenges. Sometimes a translator fails to preserve all lexemes and convey all semantic elements embedded in a word or word combination. There are also cases when the number of elements is increased. In this case formal or semantic transformation takes place. The study of culturonym transformations proves to be essential to produce a communicatively equivalent target text.

REFERENCES


