

CULTURAL DOMAINS: TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

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Abstract: *Much of the lexis of a language has a cultural referent and is thus specific to a speech community. The meaning of culturally marked words is often difficult to grasp without some cultural knowledge and poses translation problems, particularly when the words are associated with cultural domains (Nida, 2001). In the present paper we focus on the French cultural domain of cooking. After outlining the elements of the domain, we analyse the difficulties in translating the lexical units from the domain and the range of translation procedures which try to account for their meaning.*

Key words: *cultural word, cultural domain, metaphorical meaning, translation procedures, source language, target language.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research has shown the cultural component of many lexical units (Inchaurrealde, 2003; Niemeier, 2004; Wierzbicka, 1998, 2008). For instance, Wierzbicka (2008: 7) points out that “the meaning of words provide the best evidence for the reality of cultures as ways of speaking, thinking and living.”

The translation of culturally marked words is a problematic issue that has been explored by a number of authors (Inchaurrealde, 2003; Newmark, 1988, 1991). A range of translation procedures have been suggested to transfer the cultural information encoded by the SL vocabulary to the TL. We provide an overview of these translation procedures in Table 1 and we illustrate them through various French domains.

Translation strategy	Definition	Example
Cultural equivalent	The SL cultural word is translated by a TL cultural word	les sans-abri → the homeless logement social → state-subsidized housing
Functional equivalent	The SL cultural word is translated by a TL culture-free word	baccalauréat → French secondary school leaving exam
Descriptive equivalent	The SL cultural word is replaced by a description of the word in the TL	civet → stewed rabbit
Domestication	The SL cultural word is adapted to the target culture	pause-café → tea-break
Exotization/ Foreignization	The SL cultural word keeps its graphic or morphological form to make it closer to the source culture	punch (drink)

Table 1. Translation procedures for cultural words.

The meaning of culturally dependent words is difficult to transfer in another language, particularly when the words are linked to cultural domains (Nida 2001: 21), i.e. important sets within a culture. One of such sets is cooking, which is related to time, place, what and how.

In order to illustrate the translation problems posed by the lexis pertaining to cultural domains, we have chosen to examine the cultural domain of cooking in the French language, whose elements are the following:

- Participants: cuisinier, cuistot (cook), aide cuisinier (kitchen porter), chef.
- Event: actions (cuisiner, faire cuire / mijoter / bouillir, beurrer, gratiner ...) and objects (food and dishes).
- Place: cuisine (kitchen).

In the sections below, we look closely at the implications of cultural lexis for translation and at the translation strategies that try to account for the meaning of the words from cultural domains.

2. IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL DOMAINS FOR TRANSLATION

Words encoding cultural information are difficult to translate since they involve cultural knowledge and a cultural background. Literal translation may not fully render the meaning of culture bound words because they do not have the same semantic range in the source and the target languages. Let us take the case of pain / bread, a transcultural word (Newmark 1991:8), i.e. a word with similar referents and different connotations in different languages. Both pain and bread describe the staple made from flour, and yet within their separate cultural context they do not signify the same. In France pain is found in various sizes and shapes (baguette, ficelle, flûte ...) and is a cultural symbol, as shows its strong association with the prototypical image of a French person - a man wearing a beret with a long loaf (baguette) in his hands. In Britain bread is normally French bread and is not often eaten in meals. Therefore, there is a distinction both between the objects referred to by cultural words and between the function and value of these objects in their cultural context (Bassnett 1991: 19).

The problems found in transferring the meaning of cultural words to the target language can be summarised as follows:

1. The concept expressed by the source language (hence SL) word does not exist in the target language (hence TL). Three types of words from the French cultural domain of cooking fall in this category :

1.1. Words describing foods such as petit beurre, petit four, or ways of cooking, e.g. gratiné. Note that petit beurre and petit four are metonymies (part-for the whole and place-for-product metonymies respectively). It is worth mentioning the wealth of words describing different kinds of bread (flûte, baguette, miche, ficelle) and of metaphorical expressions containing the lexical item pain (manger son pain blanc le premier).

1.2. Words for French dishes, e.g. quiche, crêpe. This group includes the bulk of the terms for meat dishes (pot-au-feu, tripous, blanquette), and many kinds of confectionery, e.g. nougat, frangipane, massepain, macaron.

In these cases, either a lexical gap is found in the TL, or a translation strategy such as a loan or a descriptive equivalent is used. In loans, the SL word is preserved in the TL with the same or a similar phonetic and graphic form, e.g. *fricassée* (French) / *fricassee* (English). In Newmark's words (1988: 82), *fricassee* is an example of naturalisation, i.e. adaptation of the SL item to the pronunciation and morphology of the TL.

Some examples are provided in table 2.

French word	English word	Translation procedure
quiche	_____	_____ (Lexical gap)
quenelle confit	quenelle confit	Loan
pot-au-feu tripous blanquette petit beurre/petit four civet	boiled beef with vegetables dish made of sheep's offal veal in a white sauce a kind of butter biscuit stewed rabbit	descriptive equivalent

Table 2. Techniques to translate SL cultural words with no equivalent in the TL.

Note that the most common translation technique is the descriptive equivalent, which is an explanation of the cultural term, thus facilitating foreign readers' comprehension.

2. The SL word is diaphasically marked. For instance, *patate* and *bricheton* are colloquial words for potato and bread, respectively.

3. The other kind of translation problems we encounter when dealing with cultural lexis are the result of the metaphorical transfer of many of the lexical units from a cultural domain. The metaphorical transfer from the source domain onto various target domains operates across the French cultural domain of cooking. Some examples are shown in table 3.

Information	French word/expression	Referential meaning	Figurative meaning
Event	cuisine cuire éplucher	cook cook peel	to scheme c'est du tout cuit → it'll be a walkover il est cuit → he's done for dissect
Participants	c'est la surprise du chef	it's the chef's surprise	unexpected event
Place	cuisine	kitchen	tricks

Table 3. Metaphorical transfers in the French cultural domain of cooking.

In the French domain of cooking, the words encoding different kinds of information have a metaphorical meaning. The metaphorical meaning concerns the action (cuisiner “cook” → to scheme), the participants (the chef’s surprise signifies an unexpected event) and the place (cuisine “kitchen” → tricks).

In our analysis of the metaphorical expressions drawing on the French cultural domain of cooking we found a range of translation phenomena. These phenomena and the translation techniques used to account for them are outlined in table 4.

Translation phenomenon	Translation procedure	Example
Identical metaphorical expressions in SL and TL	Literal translation	c’est un porc → he’s a pig / a swine beurrer qq’un → butter sb up
Metaphorical expressions drawing on the same source domain in SL and TL	Approximate equivalence	c’est du nougat → it’s a piece of cake
Metaphorical expressions drawing on the same source domain in SL and TL with a different focus	Approximate equivalence	mettre les petits plats dans les grands → go to town on the meal
Metaphorical expressions drawing on different source domains in SL and TL	Approximate equivalence	donner de la confiture aux cochons → throw pearls before swine
Metaphorical expressions drawing on different source domains in SL and TL with a different realization	Approximate equivalence	faire ses choux gras → cash in on sth
No metaphorical counterpart in TL	Descriptive equivalent Standard language equivalent	se manger/se ronger les foies → worry a lot les nougats → one’s feet

Table 4. Translation phenomena concerning cultural lexical units with a metaphorical meaning.

Let us now look closely at these translation phenomena and procedures and provide further examples.

1. The metaphorical expressions in the source and target languages are in perfect translation equivalence. A literal translation is provided. Consider the following examples:

mijoter → cook up

c’est un gros poisson → he’s a big fish

la politique de la carotte → the carrot and stick policy

crème → the cream of the crop

Note that literal translation ranging from phrase to phrase through sentence to sentence. In the last example the English metaphorical expression has more force than its French counterpart.

2. Both the SL and the TL expressions reflect a metaphorical mapping from the same source domain. The French and English expressions hinge upon the domain of cooking.

The following are just a few examples:

galette (a kind of cake) → dough (money)

omelette norvégienne → baked Alaska

gagner son bifteck → earn one's crust / one's bread and butter

As we see, in the translation process the SL metaphorical term or idiom is replaced by a TL metaphorical expression or idiom that serves the same purpose in the TL. This procedure is known as "approximate equivalence" (Newmark 1988: 90).

Compare the SL and TL lexical units in the last example. The reference to the domain of cooking is made by a food item in the SL (omelette), while it is made by a cooking verb (baked) in the TL. Further, both expressions contain a geographical word: norvégienne (Norwegian) in French and Alaska in English.

3. The SL and TL metaphorical expressions belong to the same source domain, but reflect a different focus in the conceptualization of reality. The meaning of the SL expression is conveyed by an approximate equivalent in the TL. The examples in table 5 illustrate this point (the focus is on the words underlined):

Metaphorical expression	Focus in French	Focus in English
mettre les petits <u>plats</u> dans les grands / go to town on the <u>meal</u>	course	meal
être <u>cuit</u> → his <u>goose</u> is cooked	action	Food
avoir du <u>pain</u> sur la planche → have a lot on our <u>plate</u>	food	place

Table 5. Metaphorical expressions with a different focus in the SL and TL.

As we see, the French and English metaphorical expressions focus on different elements of the cultural domain: the action, the object (food/course/meal) or the place.

4. The source language metaphorical expression has a counterpart in the target language, but the target expression is not a metaphorical mapping from the same source domain. The meaning of the French cooking idiom is conveyed in English by an approximate equivalent.

The following French expressions illustrate this point:

pour une bouchée de pain → for a song

marcher sur des oeufs → skate on thin ice

ménager la chèvre et le chou → sit on the fence

donner de la confiture aux cochons → throw pearls before swine

tirer les marrons du feu → be a cat's paw

ce ne sont pas mes oignons → that's not my pigeon

retourner quelqu'un comme une crêpe → twist someone round your little finger

cuisine quelqu'un → give somebody the third degree

garder une poire pour la soif → save money for a rainy day

5. The SL and TL metaphorical expressions draw on different source domains and have different linguistic realizations: a lexical unit (an idiom) in French and a grammatical unit – a phrasal verb – in English.

Look at the following examples:

faire ses choux gras → cash in on something

poireauter / faire le poireau → hang about

6. There is not a TL metaphorical counterpart of the SL metaphorical expression. This can be accounted for on the following grounds:

6.1. The concept expressed by the SL metaphorical expression is non-existent in the TL, so that there is a lexical gap. Some examples are *promettre plus de beurre que de pain* (to make more promises than you will be able to keep) and *cuisiner* (to scheme).

6.2. The SL lexical items are idiomatic in a colloquial register. For instance, the words denoting parts of the body: *chou* (cabbage) / *poire* → head, *nougats* (a sweet food) feet, *patate* (potato) → head, face

The English counterpart is the standard English body word.

6.3. The concept expressed by the SL metaphorical word or expression exists in the TL but it is not expressed metaphorically. Instead a descriptive equivalent is provided in the TL. The descriptive equivalent is useful in that it transports the target language speakers into the original cultural context.

bûche → silly / apathic person

dinde → stupid person

moule → idiot, twit

canard → sugar lump dipped in brandy / coffee

noix → knob of butter

marron → blow

un fromage → a good job

mettre une queue de morue → put on a tailcoat

compter pour du beurre → not to count

filer une prune → give a cloat

c'est de la bouillie pour les chats / manger de la bouillie → it's gibberish

manger de la bouillie / avoir de la bouillie dans la bouche → speak unclearly, mumble

entre la poire et le fromage → casually over lunch/dinner

avoir la pêche → be on form

c'est la fin des haricots / les carottes sont cuites → it's all up / over

un pousse-café → a liqueur

être chocolat → be thwarted / foiled

pour des prunes → for nothing

faire son beurre de quelque chose → make a profit out of something

sucrer les fraises → be a bit doddery

la moutarde lui monte au nez → to lose one's temper

éplucher / décortiquer → dissect

courir après le bifteck → make a living

c'est pas du nougat / du gateau / de la nougatine / de la tarte → it's not so easy

être dans les choux → be in an embarrassing situation

aller planter ses choux → move to the countryside

faire l'andouille / le veau → act the fool

tirer une/des carotte(s) de quelqu'un / carotter quelqu'un → fiddle someone

en avoir gros sur la patate → be upset

The content meaning of the idiom is sometimes loosely reproduced. Three types of meaning are lost: a) idiomatic meaning; b) connotative meaning, and c) pragmatic meaning.

a) As advanced above, the loss of idiomatic meaning is a most relevant factor in the lexis from the French cultural domain of cooking. When SL idioms have to be spelled out in the TL, the concision and force of the SL lexical units are lost, as shown by the French word saucissonné and its French counterpart "wearing tight clothes". This is particularly true of the similes containing cultural words. Similes usually consist of an adjective and a noun linked by different elements in the different languages. The function of the noun is to intensify the quality denoted by the adjective. In French similes are built on the pattern adjective + comme + noun (sourd comme un pot), whereas English similes fit the pattern as + adjective + as + noun (as dark as night).

In the translation of similes where the nominal element is a cultural word, such element is omitted, so that the TL expression loses its intensifying character. This is illustrated by the following examples:

bête comme chou → naïve

laisser tomber quelqu'un comme une poire → to leave sb abruptly

b) The loss of connotative meaning affects the lexical items in the cultural domain which carry a negative evaluation. The English counterparts are not axiologically marked. For example, the pejorative word volaille translates as "group of (young women)". The descriptive equivalent is neutral. Another example is saucisson à pattes (a stocky person). Curiously, the positive words have an identical metaphorical meaning in the TL. It is the case of the expressions referring to an influential person: un gros poisson → a big fish.

c) The loss of pragmatic meaning is relevant in words that have diaphasic features, such as the words for the parts of the body (chou, poire, pêche for head) and in the idioms containing these units, e.g. se fendre la poire (laugh one's head off) and rentrer dans le chou de quelqu'un (attack sb physically or verbally).

The lack of colloquial equivalents in the TL explains the substitution of the colloquial words in the SL by TL items belonging to the standard language.

3. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have focused on cultural words, which require a cultural background to be properly understood and therefore pose translation problems. Further complexities arise when culturally marked words belong to cultural domains, since they encode various kinds of information ranging from the event and the participants to the time and place. We have examined the difficulties in the translation of cultural items and the range of translation procedures used to explain their meaning through the analysis of the lexis from the French cultural domain of cooking. The difficulties result from a number of linguistic phenomena, including the different semantic range of the cultural words in the source and the target languages, the absence of the cultural concept in the target language, the loss of meaning and the metaphorical meaning conveyed by many cultural words. The study has revealed the constraints of the translation strategies used to transfer the meaning of cultural units into the target language (loan, functional equivalence, descriptive equivalence, approximate equivalence) and the differences in the conceptualization of reality as reflected by the translation of metaphorical words and expressions from the French domain of cooking. These differences point to a cultural gap which makes the translation of cultural lexis a hard task.

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