

## (UN)TRANSLATABILITY OF I.T. TERMINOLOGY: THE CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVE

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### 1. On translatability – background, viewpoints, approaches

In order to set an accurate background to the issue under focus – *translatability*, as well as *untranslatability* of texts at various levels of approach – linguistic (lexical, grammatical) and cultural – a brief historical review is necessary, as it can show the various dominant trends underlying the different options of translators throughout the last two centuries.

As De Pedro (1999) points out in an extensive study on translatability of texts from a historical perspective, recent theories have maintained (under the attention of the scientific world) the concept of untranslatability, a superficial attitude, in the author's opinion, as it resulted from two main sources. On the one hand, from the expansion of the concept of translation itself, and, on the other hand, from the wish to move on from traditional, ideologically motivated arguments, which could be perceived as problem rising.

In De Pedro's opinion, there are two major views of approaching translatability. The first is the *universalist* one – claiming that the existence of linguistic universals ensure translatability. The second one – the *monadist* trend – maintains that each linguistic community interprets reality in its own particular way and this jeopardises translatability. Naturally, there has always been a continuum bridging this theoretical gap, on which various translators and translation theorists could be placed, in an attempt to combine the two apparently opposite perspectives, not to mention the existence of a third, rather recent approach, deconstructionism, that questions the notion of translation as transfer of meaning.

Three aspects are discussed regarding the hypothesis that each language conditions the manner in which its speakers perceive/interpret the world:

- there are terms which are specific to each linguistic community;
- there are concepts which are common to two or more linguistic communities, and yet have different connotations in each of them;
- each linguistic community structures reality in a different way, according to its own linguistic codes.

When approaching the translation of any type of text, all these factors should be considered as potential sources of translatability problems, but, given the fact that they are applicable to specific items, this implies that a hypothesis of total untranslatability is excluded.

As pointed out by Gentzler (1993), who summed up Chomsky's warning against the applicability of his theory based on the belief in linguistic universals, general translatability (of literature) is not relevant in translation, as there is no point by point correspondence between particular languages, which implies that there are reasonable procedures for translating between languages.

However, starting with the sixth decade of the last century, adepts at the universal translatability idea used the theory formulated in *Aspects* to give scientific soundness to their viewpoints; among them Jakobson, Bausch, Hauge, Nida and Ivir, who take the view that in principle everything can be expressed in any language.

One more idea emphasized by De Pedro should be mentioned in this preamble, viz. the existence of the basic division within untranslatability, seen as *linguistic* and *cultural*, which leads to a possible division of translation difficulties (1999) arising either from the gap between the source language and the target language (in our study English and Romanian) or from the gap between the two cultures, respectively.

Catford (1965) attempted to rationalize this issue, by showing that linguistic untranslatability is actually the failure of finding a target language equivalent, due entirely to differences between the two languages, while cultural untranslatability is due to the total absence from the culture of the target language of a certain situational feature (for instance abstract concepts, names of institutions etc.). The impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the target language is, in his opinion, a case of collocational untranslatability (therefore of linguistic nature), which is explained by the low probability of the existence of similar collocations in both source and target languages. However, as De Pedro argues, the validity of this viewpoint is questionable, as the limits established between different degrees of translatability are arbitrary, since a translator has the possibility to paraphrase in order to make the degree of translatability of a source-language oriented text identical to the one of a source and/or target-language oriented text.

A taxonomy of text types, produced in function of their *degree of translatability*, was established by Neubert and quoted in De Pedro (1999). As regards the texts written in *language for specific purposes*, viz. in information technology (IT), such texts are considered to have an *optimal translatability level*. However, a warning message is formulated by the author, who points out that the correlation between a text, its degree of translatability and its level of equivalence is not always straightforward (relatively untranslatable passages can be found within a text classified by theoretical optimum translatability).

Concluding on this point, a consensus seems to have been reached that there is no *absolute* untranslatability, whether linguistic or cultural. In modern times, with the expansion of the concept of translation, the debate on translatability *vs.* untranslatability has lost part of its validity, as the strategies translators can resort to in order to bridge a gap between the two languages/cultures have been accepted as sound translation mechanisms.

We maintain that a practical approach to teaching translation in the ESP tertiary level class must accept that students should be sensitized to the idea that, since not everything occurring in the source text can be reproduced in the target text, an evaluation of potential losses has to be carried out.

It may be of interest to show that there are studies, originating from the need to facilitate *comprehensibility of translated texts* and the *translation process* itself, which maintain that the language used in translated software user documentation should be standardized. As a result, this will reduce time and cost of translation. Therefore, such *controlled languages* (subsets of other languages, purposely limited by restricting the terminology and grammar that is allowed) have been developed, resulting in a series of controlled language *rules*, for instance control of the maximum allowed number of words in a sentence, and control of when the author is allowed to use past participles, based on existing controlled languages, style guides, research reports, and the opinions of technical writers. For Steensland and Dervisevic (2005), the *translatability factor* of a text is a measurement of the time and effort required to translate it. It involves on the complexity of the text, described through parameters of the type: length, abbreviations, as well as on the breadth or limitation of features of the translation means.

As the domain of IT raises a vast range of problems in terms of translatability of terminology, from English as source language into Romanian as target language, there has been debate on possible solutions and more generally, main lines of a common policy at national level. The issue is still under debate, with many opinions being expressed by translators, technical specialists, users of IT equipment and explanatory texts (such as help menus a. s. o.), teachers of English and of translation skills etc.

In this respect, an example of the kind of discussion topics professional people involved in translation of a certain type of software may have can be found in an online forum (see web reference in bibliography). From our perspective, it can be considered a real *focus group*, as it is moderated by a leader of the discussion, the opinions come from people who are all involved in the same translating activity and face the same problems, trying to identify common reasonable solutions and to derive a set of principles according to which to carry out their translating activity.

The main/most frequent categories/problems/questions which appear in their forum discussions are focused on (in a non-prioritized order):

- type of audience for the translated texts;
- easy access of terms in the Romanian dictionary;
- preference for the English term or the Romanian equivalent and the latter's forms; level of accessibility of terms depending on the users' level of technical competence; translating by comparison with the practice for that term in other languages, such as French, Spanish or Italian – all Romance languages;
- adapting the Romanian language to the dynamic evolution of IT terms in English; consistency of the approach to IT terms in the Romanian translation;
- considering that there are several 'generations' of users of computers, with the first ones using IT terms which were left in English and have entered common use, and with very recent users who are not professional or do not have the background knowledge of Computer Science required in order to understand terms left in English in the translated version;
- the trend detected as far as the Romanian people and language are concerned not to be exaggeratedly conservative and/or purist, as the French are;
- the truth that it is life and time that will finally decide what is translated and what is kept in the source language as a borrowing from English in terms of IT terminology, as it is finally a matter of mentality, which should be taken into consideration when technical translations of this type are effected;
- the fact that (again a matter of lack of legislation and mentality) since the Romanians have got used to pirated versions, which are all in English, therefore they have got used to the English terms in them;
- the sometimes ridiculous versions provided by dictionaries and translators who are not professionals in the field of IT;
- the risk that a wrong/forced/odd translation into Romanian may make potential users rapidly give up trying to use that software in favour of others which provide terminology that is more convenient to them;
- the effort to stick to the general policy of the Romanian language which accepts the use of neologisms up to the moment the situation is regulated;
- identifying moderate commonsensical solutions in view of generating correct, consistent and unanimously accepted translations into Romanian;
- opting in the case of translated terms into Romanian for a version which should clearly reflect/explain the function of that term;
- making the difference in translation options depending on the level of complexity for the final user, viz. using common terms for current general programs, while for

programs and tools requiring advanced knowledge the option should go for the term in the original English version plus a description/translation in brackets;

- to be open to feedback from the users themselves; to use the terms which have already entered the current use of the Romanian users, in an attempt to reach consistency and create a policy;
- to translate into Romanian those terms for which the Romanian language offers a correspondent term and adapt the rest in order to get integrated into the Romanian language in an appropriate manner as far as their 'comfortable' use in speaking and writing are concerned – which is a line that has long been present in adopting terms, such as '*parbriz*' and not '*pare-brise*';
- correlating the translated terms with already existing glossaries of IT terms; considering a dual type of approach for terms in IT that are simultaneously terms in General English – the example of the term 'wallpaper' is provided, with the suggestion that it should be left as such in an IT context and that it should be translated into Romanian as '*tapet*' for the object we use to decorate our house walls with;
- the tendency — for obvious reasons of practicality — to spell English terms which remain the same in the Romanian version in accordance with the rules of Romanian, e.g. '*aut*' and not '*out*', as this would simplify the spelling of the plural forms or those which receive an article, for instance '*auturile*' and '*autul*';
- the fact that if the English term is preserved in the Romanian text then a new user will have to learn its definition, its spelling and pronunciation, while if a Romanian term is preferred then the effort is reduced to the clarification of the definition of the concept only;
- the evolution of views on translating IT terms, with an initial post-1989 enthusiastic (free!) use of the English terms mainly, as can be seen from various publications of those years, a trend which has gradually been replaced by a more moderate approach, as some definitions have widely been adopted, for instance '*tastatură*' for '*keyboards*' — although there is an opinion that maintains that there has never been a 'totalitarianism' of the English language in our country.

The guidelines derived upon the conclusion of the debates on the quoted forum include the following:

- translations should be carried out in a co-ordinated consistent manner, on levels of complexity, accepting English terms for higher levels, e.g. using the word '*proxy*' for '*un server mandatar*' and avoiding word by word inaccurate translations, such as '*server de proximitate*' as it may be in Bucharest and the user lives in another town, therefore 'proximity' is wrong;
- terms should be translated in an intelligent manner, considering the role of the term in the sentence as a whole, therefore '*image de fundal*' for '*wallpaper*' and never '*tapet*';
- a glossary of unanimously accepted terms can be generated, which should include the already translated and accepted terms, in correlation with the DEX;
- a translator's guide can be generated, which should include a list of accepted neologisms, e.g. CD or DVD;
- consultation of translations of one term in other languages should be carried out and considered, as well as the opinion of fellow translators.

## **2. Sensitizing students on translatability of IT terms – the classroom perspective**

In this section a presentation of the didactic perspective on translating IT terminology is made, starting from the assumption that at present three main categories of terms are used in parallel, namely:

- a category of terms for which the English term is always preserved in the Romanian version, whose symbol will be 'E'; examples can be: '*Internet*', '*feedback*' – terms already accepted as such in Romanian, but also terms such as '*mouse pad*' – although the dictionary provides the almost hilarious '*covoraș de șoricel*' (Jodal 2000);

- a quite large category, labeled here as 'E/R', which reflects the transient stage we are in terms of translation policy, therefore a term that can be found in different translated texts in either the English version, or translated into Romanian; among the numerous examples, each carrying the unavoidable mark of subjectivity of the person from whom the example has been retained as far as their level of professionalism in using computers and IT terminology are concerned, E - '*folder*'/R - '*director*' (total translation), E - '*webcam*'/R '*cameră web*' (partial translation) a.s.o.;

- the 'R' terms, which means that the Romanian version is used instead of the version in English, with examples such as '*tastatură*' (and not '*keyboard*'), '*placă de bază*' (and not '*motherboard*').

The main purpose of the activities designed with a view to developing the students' translation skills is to raise the learners' awareness of the following:

- the importance of the audience profile and the text type/purpose that is translated;  
- the general mentality and trends existing in the target language about the source language terms;

- a necessary moderation in the common basic approach to translating IT terms, which should aim at technical accuracy, understandability and consistency in using already established terms.

Therefore, a cycle of tasks was created for the learners in the educational context described, viz. second-year students of the Bucharest Polytechnic Computer Science faculty taking an ESP course which includes developing translation skills. These tasks can be used either separately or as a whole, in function of the time constraints and main focus of the course.

Thus, a first task, which actually supplied many of the examples provided in this study, is that of having the students work in groups in order to identify examples of the three kinds of categories of terms: E, E/R and R. Then the learners should compare their list of examples with the Romanian versions provided in one of the few English-Romanian dictionaries of IT terminology that have been published in Romania, such as Jodal's dictionary (2000). A report to the class and a whole class discussion are then organized, in order to establish some basic principles to be applied in translating IT texts into Romanian.

Interesting elements have occurred in class from this task, as follows:

- there are a series of words that are never translated into Romanian, e.g.: '*mouse*' (as the Romanian '*șoricel*' is hilarious, the same as '*mouse pad*', for which '*covoraș de șoricel*' is equally, if not more, hilarious; also '*icons*', for which the Romanian '*icoane*' creates a semantic confusion;

- the untranslatable '*site*', '*blog*', '*web*', '*driver*', '*hacker*', '*hyper link*' a.s.o., for which the English term is either a metaphor that loses its meaning in Romanian or 'breaks' into the territory of another notion, with a potential risk of becoming ridiculous or even embarrassing;

- a curious example is '*IP*' (standing for 'Internet Protocol'), for which the acronym has been taken over as such, English pronunciation included, while the long form is found in its Romanian version, which can be explained by the existence in Romanian of the term for some time, which is also the case of '*antivirus*' or '*Autonomous System*' ('*Sistem Autonom*').

A possible follow-up of this task/ mini-project is to assign the students the task to search on the Internet for examples of texts translated into Romanian in order to discuss the approach to translating IT terminology, or to identify examples of texts in English (help

menus, scientific papers, online lectures, IT magazines etc.) and bring some of them to the English class for their colleagues to translate into Romanian.

Another task consists in providing a common list of IT terms in English and to ask the students to sort them out into the three categories, providing comments/arguments for their options.

A version of the previous task could be to initially provide two lists of terms: one with the terms in English, and another one with the Romanian translation (distractors should be included in both lists to increase the challenge of the task), and get the students to match the English terms to the appropriate Romanian translations. Some debatable/unacceptable Romanian versions should also be included, so as to stimulate a discussion of conditions of acceptability and the kind of approach to translating into Romanian a professional translator should have (for example for the English '**browser**', the dictionary equivalent in Romanian (Jodal 2000) is '**rășfoitor/scotocitor**' (sic!)).

One task that is always useful in this context is that of assigning the students a double-path activity, viz. while having to translate, individually, a technical text, the students must also keep trace of their thinking process while identifying solutions and trying to solve out problems, by means of a so-called *translation protocol*, which can take the form of a second electronic document if they work on computer, or it can be a table on a piece of paper in which they note down the problem word/context to be translated, what solutions they have found in order to solve the problem and how they have managed to decide on what solution to adopt, by discussing with a colleague, looking up in the dictionary or by 'googling' for the term or by asking for the teacher's support.

The next task is mostly focused on sensitizing students by means of examples of translations provided, as follows: the students receive one sentence in English followed by two possible Romanian versions, with the English terms translated/or not, and they have to opt for that version of the Romanian translation which they consider they would use/is most probable one. An example of such an item is provided below:

English sentence: *I asked him to put a shortcut to the program on the desktop.*  
Romanian versions:

- (a) *I-am cerut să pună un shortcut al programului pe desktop.*
- (b) *I-am cerut să pună o scurtătură a programului pe ecran.*

A permanent task can be assigned as a form of project for the students to work on outside the English class, consisting in generating a data base of IT terms from English and the best Romanian versions for them, with the necessary explanations of possible differences in function of audience, text type and purpose of translation etc.

One activity which can be added to most of the tasks presented above would be that of asking the learners to identify the causes for some translations, in order to determine them to gradually design a set of basic translation principles to be taken into account in translating in their academic and professional activities. This can be done by having them start from concrete examples, such as '**tools**', for which the direct Romanian '**scule**' presents the double impediment of being connected mostly with craftsmanship, and of having an embarrassing connotation due to its meaning in slang. Similarly, why a term such as '**programming language**' can be translated as '**limbaj de programare**' without any impediment, as the terms exist in the target language and they are neutral in terms of possible confusions of any kind with a different meaning they might have in Romanian.

What is more, to determine the students, who are the future specialists in IT, to adopt the appropriate attitude in translating (or not) recent terms that keep appearing in this field which is so dynamic, they should be given examples such as the term '**bluetooth**', which covers a technical concept, but which is also a registered mark, therefore a name. This is

certainly one example of the 'E' category term, which should be maintained as such in the Romanian versions.

### **Conclusions**

We can actually conclude by showing that the common aim of all the proposed tasks, and of similar ones that can be designed in the same line, is in fact to help the students to become an active part of a potential body of specialized professionals able to carry out translations of IT texts from English into Romanian on the basis of an appropriate framework of principles.

### **Sources**

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