

ALLUSIONS AND THEIR TRANSLATION*

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This paper addresses the problem of how to translate allusions, often unfamiliar to target-text readers, and offers a hierarchy of strategies for the translation of proper-name allusions.

The responsible translator is seen both as a competent reader and as a cultural mediator whose task it is to consider the differences of cultural background knowledge between source-text and target-text readers in order not to leave puzzling "culture bumps" in the target text.

1.1. Culturally oriented translation studies emphasize the communicative nature of translation. The source text (ST) and the target text (TT) are not simply language; both occur in a given situation in a given culture in the world, and each has a specific function and an audience of its own (see e.g. Snell-Hornby 1990). Cultural differences between the audiences must be taken into account if the TT readers are to be served well by the translator. This is true of literary as well as business translation.

Allusions, so common in English, are a case in point. Assumptions of familiarity are made by the author with the ST readers in mind, but the TT readers, who have grown up in a different culture, are often quite unable to recognize the names or phrases used and to make the necessary connections. The problem is a frequent one in literary texts and journalism, and there is a need for translation strategies to be developed to address it.

The term "allusion" is used here in a wider sense than in literary studies; it denotes translation problems arising from the presence in the source text not only of intertextual elements but also of references to other types of source-cultural phenomena, e.g. historical people and events and popular

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culture, which are likely to be unknown or less well known among target-text readers. A difference in cultural background will obviously lead to translation problems; but even where a tradition is shared, levels of exposure to it may vary. For instance, a British speaker in a fictional conversation urges his interlocutor to *remember Agag*:

- (1) 'Steve, I said at the beginning that this was a case to be taken carefully. I'm telling you now, it's a powder keg. Whatever you do, remember Agag.' (Ashford 1986:147)

It might be argued that a biblical allusion like this one should not present a translation problem because matters in the Bible are surely shared background knowledge among both English and Finnish readers. Other English allusions to Agag have come my way in the past three years, suggesting that the key-phrase it involves, "walking delicately" (carefully), is linked to the name in the minds of many English readers:

- (2) what he had set out to do was so much in jeopardy now, that he must walk like Agag, if he were ever to /.../ 'live to fight another day' (Cradock 1986:187)

and the larger English dictionaries of quotations include a reference to his sad story¹; yet none of the 55 Finnish readers I recently tested knew the name. It is obviously no good confidently adhering to a translation strategy of minimum change, and hence e.g. preserving a name, if the name in question is unknown to the readers.

1.2. The work reported here (Leppihalme 1990) is based on a self-compiled corpus of over six hundred examples in contemporary fiction and non-fiction, and a couple of hundred marginal examples: the transitions were indeed fluid and the boundaries diffuse, to quote Meyer (1968). Not surprisingly, the function of allusions varies. Some are used as lexical elements or with only short-range meaning in the context, while others convey important information on characters and themes. The importance of the context was another of the factors which made a detailed classification or statistical approach inadvisable: one and the same allusion was used in a

¹ "Agag came unto him delicately, And Agag said, Surely the bitterness of death is past." (I Samuel 15:32)

stereotyped way (as a "dead" allusion) in one text but reanimated in another. I have concentrated on a practical question: how are allusions in English texts to be translated for Finnish readers, taking into account the undeniable differences in background knowledge? The purpose is not to attempt to give inflexible rules but only to offer guidelines to practising translators and teachers of translation, without suggesting that such guidelines could be applied mechanically to individual problems or guarantee a successful outcome. In addition to listing the range of available strategies, I also apply the concept of a decision process (Levý 1967). The translation strategies form a hierarchy on the lines of Levý's minimax principle: a minimum of effort but a maximum of effect. So, a familiar allusion requires less thought than an unfamiliar one; an allusion of great significance for the interpretation of the text requires more attention than a joke adding little to the characterization of a minor speaker. The range of the research includes both the use and the sources of the allusions in the corpus and three areas touched on in this paper: the role of the translator, reader responses² and translation strategies.

2.1. I see the role of the translator as that of an independent and competent language professional whose skills are needed by both the author and the TT reader. The translator is neither a semi-automatic transcoder nor a monkey "with no choice save to make the same grimaces as his master," as was suggested by a French translator of Faulkner (Coindreau, cited in Briere 1988:199). The responsible translator does not allow the TT to become obscured or impoverished unnecessarily, nor does s/he leave the reader puzzled at "culture bumps" (Archer 1986), anomalies resulting from unexplained source-cultural names or phrases in a TT³, if this can be avoided by choosing a different strategy. I argue that translators should bear in mind that they are cultural mediators, who must use their bicultural competence to identify and analyse the function of allusions in the ST, and to judge what translation strategy will serve the TT readers best. Achieving

² Experimental data on reader responses will be provided in the doctoral dissertation on which I am currently working.

³ The term "culture bump" occurs in Archer (1986), but with reference to intercultural communication in general rather than translation.

this bicultural competence is the responsibility both of the universities where translators are educated and of translators themselves: no number of set books will suffice if the translator is not willing to learn more, throughout his/her working life. (The question of whether or not educationalists should provide the new generation with shared background knowledge to ensure uniform cultural literacy has of course been hotly debated in recent years between traditionalists and multiculturalists, particularly in the United States, and has political implications - consider Hirsch 1988 and his subsequent *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* 1990).

2.2. The cultural mediator role of the translator seems to be still largely unrecognized at present, if the three translations of novels whose treatment of allusions I have looked at so far⁴ are indicative of the norm. The translators favoured the strategy of minimum change. With unfamiliar allusions this often leads to unclear phrases or passages in the TT which readers must either skip or stumble over. This unfortunately means depriving TT readers of the chance to participate in the literary process and to derive pleasure from it. In recent years it has been emphasized in literary studies that the reader is the real creator of the text (e.g. Genette 1980). Without going any deeper into this controversial idea and the question of the relevance of authorial intentions, it can perhaps be said that allusions may cause a TT reader problems which are not just legitimate alternative interpretations but real problems of language and a lack of source-cultural background knowledge:

- (3) Behind them was a warren of corridors down which eccentric looking persons hurried with White Rabbit expressions. The sound rooms were cosy burrows furnished with battered soft leather chairs and historical-looking microphones and switchboards /.../. (Lurie 1986)

Hissien takana oli kanitarhamainen käytävien verkosto, missä ravasi omalaatuisia tyyppejä kasvoillaan Valkoisen jäniksen ilme. Äänityshuoneet olivat kodikkaita pesäkoloja kalusteinaan pehmoisia nahkatuoleja ja historiallisen näköisiä mikrofoneja ja kytkintauluja /.../. (Translation by Elsa Carroll, 1988)

⁴ The corpus of examples consists of 21 novels and 200 newspaper articles. At the time the Licentiate thesis was being written, only four of the novels had been translated, one of which was out of print.

A reader who has grown up with a different canon of children's classics (if any) and thus does not associate *White Rabbit expressions* with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* may be perplexed, as were 70% of the 76 Finnish readers in a recent experiment of mine. Instead of recognizing the Rabbit as worried and anxious or self-important and vaguely ridiculous, these Finnish readers had little to go by. Some said that the phrase could mean anything at all, others went by the standard characteristics of the hare in Finnish folktales, seeing a timid creature about to flee at the slightest danger. For one, white meant innocence; another associated rabbits with childbirth; a third remembered that the hare changes the colour of its coat in winter. There was the occasional creative touch: one reader thought the expression was "curious, expectant, unbiased, like a little child, but also suspicious and helpless"⁵; this reader called the phrase "an interesting, curiosity-evoking image". But what should we make of a reader who associates the phrase with the unseeing eyes of a drug addict ("a pale sort of person with an unfocused look - a drug addict or the like")? Is this another creative reading - or has a reader to whom "eccentric looking persons at the BBC with *White Rabbit expressions*" means a crowd of drug addicts misunderstood Lurie's description?

2.3. Translation practice in Finland, judging by the three translations studied, appears to favour the minimum change strategy. This is sometimes defended on the grounds that translators are not supposed to explain anything. I take issue with this view, arguing that it is based on the evidently incorrect assumption that ST readers and TT readers share a common cultural background enabling them to react to texts in a similar way, if only the language barrier is overcome. This means ignoring the intercultural element in translation, the need of TT readers for occasional translatorial assistance when minimum change would result in a culture bump, a phrase or line which is incomprehensible in its TL context. The evident fact of inter-individual variation within both ST and TT audiences does not, in my view, absolve the responsible translator from considering the needs of the vast majority of TT readers. Minimum change is generally an excellent

⁵ The readers answered in Finnish (translations by RL).

strategy for familiar allusions, but with unfamiliar ones, it often leads to culture bumps.

Translational assistance can take many forms, but to discuss the full range of strategies is beyond the scope of this paper. Strategies are slightly different for proper-name allusions and key-phrase allusions (the latter are not discussed in this paper), and of course text type and function must be considered, too. Examples used here are from "middle-brow" novels meant for readers who read books for their stories but like them well-written. The problem is not limited to translations of fiction, however, as any reader of the *Economist* can attest.

3. The decision process for proper names goes as follows. Each strategy is considered in turn if necessary. The fastest and easiest come first, which means that the translator only proceeds if an earlier strategy is not thought to provide a satisfactory solution. At the translating stage the evaluator of the success or otherwise of a particular solution is necessarily the translator.

minimum change >

guidance >

replacement by (better-known SL or TL) name >

replacement by common noun (or similar way of making (some of) the associations overt) >

omission or overt explanation

If the allusion is thought to be familiar, minimum change is the strategy of choice. But if it is deemed unfamiliar, the translator may first attempt some unobtrusive guidance: adding a word or two to help with names (*King Harold* instead of *Harold*, *the battle of Hastings* instead of *Hastings*). Encyclopedic information may be added:

- (4) "I assume you think you were some kind of Sir Galahad protecting my good name when you punched that poor sexist fool at the library./.../" (Parker 1987:49)

"Ja kun sinä mottasit sitä onnettoman typerää seksistiä siellä kirjastolla, taisit luulla olevasi jonkinmoinen sir Galahad, ritareista puhtain, jonka velvollisuutena on varjella mainettani./.../" (Translation by Erkki Jukarainen, 1988)

This technique has been called writing the footnotes into the translation. The translator must be careful, though, not to insult his/her readers' intelligence: an allusion is usually meant to convey its meaning by connotation. It is easy to imagine overt explanations (like footnotes) ruining the effect completely, which is why actual footnotes can be used in exceptional cases only (perhaps where the cultural barrier is much greater than that between English and Finnish, and even then it might be advisable instead to list the explanations before or after the text, for readers to consult if and as they wish).

If the translator is not satisfied with the result of guidance, s/he will then consider replacement. Replacement by a better-known source-language name of course requires that there is one with similar associations: a ludicrous comparison of a male private eye with *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (Parker 1987:11), the sunny heroine of an American pre-teenage girls' book not known in Finland, was quite successfully transferred by changing the name into *Pollyanna* (translation by Jukarainen). Pollyanna is another sunny and wholesome fictional heroine, and in contrast to the name in the ST she was known to half of my (mostly student) informants in a recent quiz. The substitution of a target-language name, on the other hand, must be carefully considered even where the associations are alike. There is the risk of destroying the illusion: in a tense situation, a private eye may wish for the speed of Fangio (Juan Manuel Fangio, the South American racing car driver of the 1950s) (Moody 1985:153), but inserting the target-culturally "better known" name of Keke Rosberg is hardly a responsible solution.

The transfer of associations can also be achieved with replacement of names by common nouns or noun phrases, with at least part of the connotations or associations spelled out; thus when an interlocutor's place of employment is referred to as *Dotheboys Hall* (the name of the horrible school in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*), this name might be replaced by *koulurähjä* ("miserable, poor school"). The insult is cruder, true; but the coherence of the conversation requires that the insult should be registered by the Finnish reader. This would not happen if an unrecognizable name

were used. This strategy could also be used to deal with Agag and the White Rabbit.

As candidates for omission I would include for instance wisecracks of little importance for characterization or plot - with the proviso that there are always exceptions to generalisations like this. As a short-cut, because the translator is unwilling to go to the trouble of looking things up, omission is, in my view, generally unacceptable.

Finally, clearly the strategies themselves are simply those that are in principle available; what I have done is arrange them into a hierarchy and recommend that the full range be considered when necessary; and that the necessity be gauged after the TT reader's needs have been taken into account. Despite a number of successes, the Finnish translators of texts in the corpus whose work I have examined tended to undertranslate allusions, adopting the strategy of minimum change, which led to a loss of the connotations in the case of unfamiliar allusions. If this is a general trend (and this I hope to look into with more translations), it indicates that translators either do not see allusions as a specific cross-cultural problem deserving translatorial attention, or that they consider allusions untranslatable and therefore leave the responsibility for incomprehensible references with the author (the monkey principle).

Compromise is unavoidable in translation, and we must accept that it is not always possible to preserve all associations; but a culturally competent translator who is aware of the allusion problem and sensitive to the needs of his/her audience can at least attempt to give TT readers some of the participatory pleasure which ST readers experience when recognizing a neat allusion.

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