The Competent Intercultural Communicator. AFinLA Yearbook 1993.
(eds. Löfman, L. & Kurki-Suonio, L. & Pellinen, S. & Lehtonen, J.)
Publications de l'association finlandaise de linguistique appliquée 51, pp. 235–244

THERE IS NO WORD FOR 'ADULTERY' IN HAWAIIAN: THE TRANSLATION OF NON-EXISTENT CONCEPTS.

Deborah D.K. Ruuskanen
University of Helsinki

This paper deals with the problems faced by translators and interpreters when they encounter a word in the source language for a concept which simply does not exist in the culture of the target language. Although similar to the problems related to the translation of idioms, the problems of non-existing concepts cannot be handled in the same way. For example, the words of an idiom may be translated even without the translator recognizing that it is an idiom, but the words for a non-existent concept will of course be non-existent. Some historical background related to the problems faced by American missionaries in Hawaii in the middle of the last century will be presented, using the translation of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20: 14) as an illustration. Some solutions used by present-day translators for the translation of non-existent concepts will be discussed. The theoretical background underlying this type of translation, in particular Malmkjaer's model of 'passing theories' in translation, derived from the debate on cultural relativism, will also be briefly given here.

INTRODUCTION

The missionaries coming to Hawaii from the United States in the middle of the last century were confronted with a culture completely unlike their own. Unaccustomed to matriliniar inheritance, powerful female goddesses, and women with considerable political, cultural and economic power, the missionaries often misinterpreted what they saw and heard. On the other hand, they had a great many problems with concepts that did not exist in the Hawaiian culture, but which formed an important part of the patriarchal Christian culture the missionaries were so concerned to teach the Hawaiians. One of these concepts was that of adultery.

A missionary trying to translate the seventh commandment (Thou shalt not commit adultery) into Hawaiian was set an almost impossible task. A culture in which inheritance comes through the mother places little importance on

who the father is: In fact, the role of the father in conception was unknown in the beginning, conception being attributed to the Goddess (see Campbell 1949/1988). A culture in which females have power in all sectors, a culture in which females choose their own sexual partners, which does not force monogamy on anyone, places little importance on sexual 'fidelity' to one partner. It is not surprising that such a culture would have no word for 'adultery'.

The translator who had to cope with these problems is, deservedly, a major figure in the history of Hawaii. His name was Lorrin Andrews, and his dedication to his mission and to the people of Hawaii is almost legendary. He made the first "Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language" (Andrews, 1865/1974), and was instrumental in the translation of the Bible into Hawaiian. His handling of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20: 14) was chosen as the subject of this study because it both presents one solution to the translation of a concept which is non-existent in the target language (TL), and illustrates the validity of the model of translation, based on the debate on cultural relativism put forward by Malmkjaer (1992).

STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING CONCEPTS THAT DO NOT EXIST IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

To a large extent, the translation of concepts that do not exist in the target language (TL) follows the course outlined by Leppihalme (1990) in her excellent flow chart for strategies for the translation of allusions. The difference is that she deals with allusions expressing concepts that exist in the TL. Of course, the biggest problem with allusions is that they must be first recognized as allusions. That particular problem is not present in the translation of non-existent concepts: It disappears as soon as the translator realizes that the reason there are no words in the dictionaries for the concept is that the concept itself is missing in the TL.

The strategies used for the translation of idioms are also of little use here. It is possible to translate the words of an idiom even without recognizing that it is an idiom: the Brazilian idiom for 'turning somersaults' can be translated as 'planting trees', and may not even cause the readers of the translation to raise their eyebrows. But when there are no words in the target language available to the translators, they must adopt a different strategy.

Present-day translators faced with the problem of translating a concept which does not exist in the (TL) can adopt one of several strategies. First of all, they start from the point of view that 'does not exist' means there are no words (to the best of the translator's knowledge of both the TL vocabulary and culture) in the TL for the concept presented in the source text. If they then take Vermeer's (1989) stance that the context and overall purpose, or the *skopos*, of the text is of primary importance, their choice of strategy will depend on how they interpret the *skopos*. This interpretation is crucial to Malmkjaer's (1992) theory, which is briefly presented later on in this study, and which also underlies the translator's choice of strategy.

The strategies available to present-day translators for translating concepts that do not exist in the TL are as follows:

1. **They can adopt the source language (SL) word.** This can be done in connection with an explanation in the text, or an explanation in a footnote, or no explanation at all. One of the best examples of this is the adoption into English of the Finnish word 'sauna', which had to be explained (Finnish steam bath) or modified (Finnish sauna) until the concept became familiar as the use of saunas spread outside Finland.

2. **They can make a new word,** either based on semantically similar TL words, or adopting TL transcription. If the concept is completely unknown, even semantically similar words may be lacking in the TL. Again, explanations may be given as described above for adopting the SL word.

3. **They can adopt an existing, semantically related TL word,** with synonyms preferred. An explanation of the differences in concept may be required. After all, what the translator is in effect doing is introducing the new concept into the TL.

4. **They can leave the word(s) out.** Here the concept may be explained in the text, or in a footnote, or the entire concept may be deleted. This is where the *skopos* is strongest in determining how important the word(s) in question are to the purpose and context of the source text. If the purpose will not suffer by deleting the concept, if long explanations will hinder the purpose of the source text by adding too much linguistic 'noise', the translator may decide the best option is simply to ignore the problematic concept in the translation.

THE TRANSLATION OF 'ADULTERY' INTO HAVAIIAN

In his translation of the Bible, and in the compilation of his dictionary, Lorrin Andrews (1865/1974) actually had only one choice from the above list of strategies. He could have adopted the SL word, except for two problems: the Hawaiians would have found it unpronounceable, and it would have required explanations every time it was used.

The second strategy was a more likely choice, in that making a new word based on a TL transcription would have eliminated the pronunciation problem. The transcription of names and events was commonplace, with 'Christ' becoming 'Kaliki' and 'mass' or 'church service' becoming 'maka' ('merry' was given as 'mele', so that 'Merry Christmas' becomes 'Mele Kalikimaka'.) However, since Hawaiian has only 12 letters, and every syllable and every word must end in a vowel, the word which would have resulted from the transcription of 'adultery' would have been 'apulipeli'. This strange-looking creation bears little resemblance to other Hawaiian words and would, again, have required considerable explanation every time it was used.

Option four, leaving the concept out, was simply not open to Andrews. It was part of his mission to explain Christianity to the 'natives', and the concept of adultery is central to the religion and the accompanying concepts of sin and sexual morality. Nor was it possible to leave out one of the Ten Commandments!

That leaves option three, adopting a semantically related TL word or phrase. In fact, many Hawaiian words are more phrases than 'words', built up from

other words. The word for 'explorer, seafarer', for example, 'kelakapoaea' is built up of 'kela', 'to go beyond, to exceed, to excel, to be great above another'; 'ka' indicating a characteristic belonging to someone or something; 'po', a clitic intensifier; and 'aea', to wander (or to live unsteadily!). Andrews chose to create his new word in this manner, so that its meaning would be immediately apparent to the Hawaiians he hoped to convert.

The word given in Andrews' dictionary (1865/1974) for 'adultery' is 'he moekolohe'. 'He' is often used as the indefinite article, but 'he' as a word means 'the grave', or the 'palm worm' that killed trees and shrubs, and the word 'hemoe' means the near dissolution of body and soul as in illness or dreams or even death. This would immediately have the overtone of 'mortal sin', a rather nice touch. 'Moe' means 'to sleep' or 'bed', and 'ko lohe' is to 'make mischief', so that 'adultery' to the Hawaiian hearer becomes 'to make mischief in bed'.

In the Hawaiian–English section of the dictionary (which contains only 4000 entries), Andrews defines 'he moekolohe' as follows:

> verb. a phrase, not a word
> 1. to have unlawful intercourse between the sexes
> 2. adultery or fornication
> 3. to sleep at an improper place or time
> 4. 'to commit lewdness' (giving relevant Bible quotations)
> 5. figurative: to practice idolatry, a breach of contract (Ezek. 16: 8, 15). (Since Jehovah claimed to be the husband and protector of His people, the worship of other Gods was considered adultery.)
> 6. to defile, pollute
>
> Moekolohe – s (?substantive?). the unlawful intercourse of the sexes, adultery, fornication, etc.; generally connected with many other vices. Romans 1: 29.
> Moekolohe – adj. Adulterous, lustful; morally impure. (Andrews 1865/1974, 394)

MALMKJAER'S MODEL: CULTURAL RELATIVISM AS AN AID TO TRANSLATION

The translation of the concept of 'adultery' by Andrews into Hawaiian, a language and culture in which that concept was nonexistent, is a good illustration of Malmkjaer's (1992) model of translation. Malmkjaer's model also works well in explaining why Andrews lumped together adultery, homosexuality, idolatry, lust, and sleeping in church as being translated from English into Hawaiian with one and the same phrase.

For those unfamiliar with the debate on cultural relativism, it is very briefly reviewed in the following paragraphs. Benjamin Whorf (see Carroll 1956) first hypothesized that a culture was reflected in the language of the people of that culture, and that while the language and culture might contain concepts that were foreign to speakers of English, or even lacking in the English language, it would still be possible to explain in English other ways of conceiving the world and how other languages reflect this other conception. Quine (1960) then countered with the argument that, if we do not know what an utterance means because we have no access to the concept, and the only access to the concept is the utterance, then we cannot work out what is meant. Carried to its logical extreme, this would mean that NO theory of meaning for ANY language would be possible. This in turn would lead to the conclusion that translation cannot be evaluated because there is no way of knowing if the translation is right or wrong.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) would appear to support the strong version of cultural relativism as outlined by Quine, above, when they state that "people with very different conceptual systems than our own may understand the world in a very different way than we do. Thus, they may have a very different body of truths than we have, and even different criteria for truth and reality." (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 181)

Lakoff and Johnson were arguing against Davidson (1973), who focuses on concepts, and supposes that speakers in speaking take the attitude that their utterances are true. Davidson goes on to say that, if we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances as being based on a set of concepts and beliefs that are consistent and true by our own standards, then we have no reason to consider the speaker as being rational or having beliefs or saying anything. Davidson's argument provides a justification for cognitive translation, because it assumes that other people have beliefs similar to our own. This looks back to Tarski, whose convention of Truth (T) is at the heart of all this. Tarski held that if speakers have beliefs at all, then they must hold that something is true. Truth was important, not meaning. Tarski uses translation to prove his theories of truth, while Davidson uses theories of truth to support his notion of translation. (See Davidson 1973, 1974.)

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argue that Davidson's argument will fail because he assumes we all have the same mental attitude of holding something true, and (as stated above) they believe different cultures may have different definitions of 'truth'. But Davidson (1974) points out that cultural relativism operates on the basis of an assumption of dualism between scheme and content: either conceptual schemes organize something, or they fit it (Davidson 1974, 14). But since conceptual schemes are based on experience, and the content they describe is based on this experience, then the dualism is a fallacy. Davidson is approaching the idea that we cannot divorce the notion of truth from that of translation (Davidson 1974, 17).

Davidson has paved the way for a theory of cognitive translation similar to that proposed by Whorf. But, as any practicing translator knows, the relationships between words or concepts in two languages are seldom one-on-one. Davidson's answer to this is to speak in terms of the uniqueness of meaning relationships in terms of a given utterance spoken at a given time by a given speaker to a given hearer under a given set of circumstances (Davidson 1973). This utterance-user-hearer-circumstances relationship leads

to Toury's (1980) 'possible equivalents', which are the words we (the translators) might have used in the same circumstances.

According to Davidson (1973), each instance of linguistic interaction requires the participants to approach each other with 'prior theories' based on how they are prepared in advance to interpret each other's utterances. The 'passing theory' for the speaker (S) is that prior theory which S wants the hearer (H) to use for S's utterance. The passing theory for H is that prior theory which H in fact uses. The two passing theories may not be identical, but when they are, H interprets S in the way S wishes to be interpreted. Malmkjaer's (1992) model supposes that translation amounts to the convergence of the 'passing theories' of the writer as first speaker writing to the source language readers (first hearers), of the translator as part of that audience (hearer) and as second writer (speaker), and of the target language readers as the final audience (hearer).

When Andrews made his translation of 'adultery' into Hawaiian, he had a very clear prior theory which he wished his audience to use to interpret his utterances: He was convinced of the truth of his religion, and he wished all of his utterances to be interpreted in the light of the accepted Christian doctrine of his time. It may be relevant here, since we are dealing with adultery, to point out that Andrews was a bachelor of many decades who married very late in order to be allowed to become a missionary. As a prerequisite to mission service, all men had to marry so that they could "resist the temptations of the native women." (Introduction by W.D. Alexander to the 1974 edition of Andrews' Dictionary 1865/1974) Seen in this light, it becomes clear why Andrews included lust, lewdness, homosexuality, sleeping in church, moral impurity and idolatry all under the same Hawaiian word for 'adultery'. According to the 'prior theory' he was using and wished his hearers to use, one Hawaiian word could cover the lot, since he believed they all belonged together. 'Sleeping in the wrong time and place with the wrong persons' might be a better gloss of the phrase 'he moekolohe' than the 'making mischief in bed' given above.

It is hard to know what the Hawaiians of the 1860s made of all this. Like the good pagans of medieval England (see i.a. Campbell 1949/1988), perhaps they paid lip service to the church of their conquerors and kept right on with their old ways. The author of the present study knows one family in Hawaii in which it was still customary in the 1960s for the daughters to choose their own sexual partners and to have one child to prove their fertility before they married. It is doubtful if the passing theory his Hawaiian hearers chose to interpret Andrews' translation was the one which he intended them to use. Since understanding of translation, according to Malmkjaer's (1992) model is dependent on the convergence of the passing theories of the translator and the TL audience, it is also doubtful if the Hawaiians understood the seriousness of the offence of adultery in the way that Andrews wished them to. It is a matter of record that the missionaries had great difficulty in subduing the sexuality of the Hawaiian women (see any history of the Hawaiian Islands).

This raises the question that perhaps Quine, and Lakoff and Johnson were right, after all, in that the truth of one culture is not the truth of another. However, it does not invalidate Malmkjaer's model, since Andrews was able to find a translation for 'adultery' that the Hawaiians were able to understand at least in part. They no doubt understood that Andrews thought that 'sleeping around' was a terrible thing to do, since it was a topic he would return to again and again, emphasizing each time what naughty children they were. Malmkjaer's model also helps us to understand why today's translators might find Andrews' translation of the term 'adultery' quaint and old-fashioned, not to say outdated, since the morality of his time and place is not the same as ours. The 'passing theories' (and even the 'prior theories') of today's translators are not the same as those of Andrews. To try and see things from the Hawaiians' point of view, it would be very interesting to look at Andrews' translation of the Hawaiian concept of 'aloha', which although it has come into the English language, can still be translated as 'hello', 'goodbye', 'welcome', 'good luck', 'fare well', 'good health', 'friendship', 'love' or 'making love'. But that is the topic of another study.

REFERENCES

Andrews, Lorrin 1865/1974. *A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language.* Tuttle, Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan.

Campbell, J. 1949/1988. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* London: Paladin, Grafton Books.

Carroll, J.B. (ed.) 1956. *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf.* Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.

Davidson, D. 1973. Radical interpretation. *Dialectica* 27, 313–28.

Davidson, D. 1974. *On the very idea of a conceptual scheme.* Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association, 47, 5–20.

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Leppihalme, R. 1990. *Crossing a Cultural Barrier: Allusions and their translation.* Unpublished Licentiate Thesis, Faculty of the Humanities. University of Helsinki.

Malmkjaer, K. 1992. Cultural Relativism and Translation: Laying the Ghost. Unpublished paper delivered at the Translation Studies Congress, September 9–12. Institut für Übersetzer- und Dolmetscherausbildung der Universität Wien. Vienna, Austria.

Quine, W. van O. 1960. *Word and Object.* Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.

Toury, G. 1980. "Translated Literature: System, norm, performance: Toward a TT-oriented approach to literary translation" In: *In Search of a Theory of Translation.* Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 35–50.

Vermeer, H.J. 1989. "Translation, interpreting and text linguistics" In: Chesterman, A. (ed.) *Readings in Translation Theory.* Helsinki: Finn Lectura.