

## In/visibility strategies in translating culture-bound items: a Ukrainian-English case study

### Introduction

The question about translators' visibility acquired a new dimension in Translation Studies and inspired a whole body of research after Lawrence Venuti's famous book [1]. By choosing to stay invisible or to come into the light the translator engages in dialogue with the author and the reader. Leaving aside various aspects of this problem, interesting in their own right, we will focus on how translators' presence may be manifested at the textual level.

Some well-known ways in which translators choose to present themselves to the audience and convey a message include translator's prefaces, footnotes, endnotes, comments in brackets etc. Such devices may be particularly tempting to translators who work with texts abounding with cultural references and culture-specific items (such as interview transcripts, which will be described later). This is particularly the case with documentary translations [2: 47] rather than instrumental ones.

### Data and Corpus

The data used for this paper come from an international research project conducted by the Christian Michelsen Institute from Norway. The project, entitled "Legal Cultures in Transition – the Impact of European Integration 2007–11" (Research Council of Norway Award 182628), is conducted in five countries: UK, Norway, Ukraine, Poland and Bulgaria. It gathers data from interviews with two broadly defined types of respondents: *legal insiders* (legal professionals, lawmakers, civil servants, policemen etc.) and *legal outsiders* (members of the general public). Both groups of respondents are asked questions concerning their understanding of law and its role in life, images of legal professionals, terrorism and the war on terror, as well as European culture and values.

In 2008 a total of 28 group interviews were held in various cities, towns and villages across Ukraine. Interviews were held in the Russian and Ukrainian language by local researchers. Each interview recording was then transcribed into a written format and the resulting transcripts were translated into English. The final translations were delivered to the international team of researchers.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on English translations of 27 transcripts originally made in Russian (20) and Ukrainian (7). The resulting corpus of English texts contains ca. 446,400 words in total. When the analysis was performed no data about the translators were unavailable so we can only make guesses as to who translated which transcripts and how many people in total were involved. Translators' names were not included in the translated transcripts, which is a common practice in social research. Another important factor is that at the time of analysis we did not know what kind of instructions (if any) the translators received before setting off to do their work. Nor do we have any information on what kind of target audience they had in mind when working. Again, we can only make guesses by looking at the translated material.

### Characteristics of Transcripts that may Provoke Visibility

Interview transcripts represent a very particular type of source text with a number of characteristics that set them apart from other genres such as literary, technical, legal or other texts. Let us just consider a few of them which, in our view, are likely to prompt translators to intervene openly and break the barrier of invisibility.

*Pre-processing.* First and foremost, the transcripts received by translators can be considered translations in the Jakobsonian sense [3: 114]. The original spoken speech (the interview) was subjected to a kind of intersemiotic translation (conversion from spoken speech to writing). In the process of transcription, a multi-faceted and multimodal communicative event involving a group of people is converted into a linear text. To use a metaphor, interview transcription is the opposite of taking a script and making a movie on this basis. In transcription, a "movie" is transformed into a "script". This fact has numerous implications. One of them is that the transcriber already makes some choices and selects some aspects or speech while ignoring or simplifying others. The prosody of the language may not have been preserved (e.g. leading to loss of irony) and gestures may not have been described to complement and/or explicate words. The only standard elements that transcribers *do* include in interview transcripts (in brackets) are those which refer to illegibility of speech (незаборчиво/нерозбірливо), laughter and general noise. Such comments may reflect some flavour of the original group discussion but may also result from poor quality of the sound and, as such, be of no help to the translator or the final reader. Literature on transcribing conventions is rich. Interesting examples are given, for instance by Cameron [4] or Ross [5].

*Orality.* One essential feature of transcripts as source texts for translation is that they reflect natural (or near-natural) spoken conversation. This means that the original speech will have the characteristics of spoken speech, for instance, spontaneity and lack of planning, interruptions in mid-sentence, sudden changes of topic, unfinished utterances, heavy reliance on context for understanding etc. The translator, herself/himself not being a witness to the event, may want to "normalise" these features and make them more acceptable to the reader (actually, the first stage of normalisation takes place during the transcription process as the transcriber usually decides/interprets where the spoken sentence begins and ends, corrects what she/he considers to be errors etc.).

*Culture-bound items.* As a rule, interviews in social research (such as those conducted under the "Legal Cultures in Transition" project) abound with local references, mentions of *realia*, and other elements from the respondents' daily lives. This fact necessitates choices on the part of the translator, for instance: Do I transcribe (*Verkhovna*

*Rada*) or translate (*Supreme Council*)? Do I domesticate or foreignise (to use the famous distinction described by Venuti [1: 20])? Do I confine myself to plain-text or do I add a comment, a footnote etc.? There are, of course, many established techniques to translate culture-bound items (*realia*, реалии), described, for instance by Гарбовский [6: 483–485] but the final choice is always made by the translator.

#### **Staying Invisible or Coming to the Fore?**

As mentioned earlier, the analysed corpus contained no data on translators (their identity or number) so we cannot really identify individual visibility/invisibility strategies. For this reason, we will refer to transcripts rather than translators. The 27 studied translations showed hardly any consistency in terms of in/visibility strategies, which may imply that it was translators' sole decision to remain invisible or come to the fore and that such decisions were made inconsistently.

When looking at the corpus, we neglected indications of transcribers' presence such as words/comments in round brackets (смех), (галдёж), (неразборчиво) and looked for elements which are likely to manifest translators' in/visibility. As a result, we identified four degrees of translators' visibility in the corpus.

1) *No manifest visibility*. In such cases the translator chose to stay invisible and "hide" behind the text. However, this does not mean that no active intervention was going on. Consider this example:

*O: под Верховную Раду*

*T: towards the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (intervention, i.e. addition, without becoming visible)*

2) *Additions in round brackets*. This is the lowest manifest level of visibility. The translator does add some notes or comments but does so using the same graphic convention as the transcriber, i.e. words in rounded brackets. This kind of mimicry strategy makes the translator and the transcriber part of the same "data processing team," as in these examples:

*O: На даче*

*T: In your garden (dacha)*

*O: Я работаю в ЖЭКе*

*T: I work in the Housing Office (ЖЭК)*

3) *Additions in square brackets*. Graphically different from other parts of the text, this method sets the translator's comments apart from transcriber's comments which are given in rounded brackets. Nevertheless, this strategy makes the translator a distinct player in the analysed chain of communicative events. Example:

*O: Голодомор*

*T: Holodomor [artificial famine of 1932-33]*

4) *Phrase "translator's note" plus addition*. This strategy gives the highest degree of visibility to the translator: not only is a comment added but the source of the comment (the translator) is identified as well. In this way, the translator makes an attempt to enter in a dialogue with the reader. As such interruptions strongly draw attention to the comment, the reading process becomes less smooth. One might expect, therefore, that the translator should have a very good reason to distract the reader with this kind of manifest visibility. But is this really the case? In our corpus there were only four such interventions and at least two of them did not seem essential (they occurred at the beginning when the interview participants were introducing themselves, not yet discussing the topics in question). Examples:

*O: Я учусь в Нархозе.*

*T: I study in Narhoz (translator's note: Kiev National Economical University)*

*O: Экскурсовод. В Лавре работаю.*

*T: I am a guide. I work in Lavra (translator's note: Lavra is the oldest Orthodox monastery of Rus and Ukraine).*

The reasons for such manifest interventions are not clear since the same translator (in the same transcript) kept, for instance, the following items without any comments:

*O: Вот есть шоу Савика Шустера.*

*T: There's a show of Savik Shooster.*

*O: Мне нравится только Ренат Ахметов.*

*T: Renat Akhmetov appeals to me.*

Naturally, there may be a great variety of reasons why translators might want to come to the fore and make themselves visible from behind the 'glass pane'. They would continuously try to strike a balance between what they see as a necessary visible intervention and between uninterrupted, smooth flow of text. However, the available corpus does not allow us to identify any consistency in such behaviour.

**Conclusions.** Overall, analysis of the corpus (presented briefly here) has shown that translators chose to remain invisible or opted for visibility without any obvious pattern or strategy. Additions and notes seemed made at random, without any clear purpose that could be identified by looking at the data. A proposed follow-up of this project involves interviews with translators and, hopefully, this part will bring some interesting findings on the issue of in/visibility in translating culture-bound items.

In order to achieve consistency in this translation project, one solution would be to use a classification of culture-bound items and formulate some guidelines on how to handle them. Another option which could help to achieve the *Skopos* of the transcript translations would be to brief translators on the purpose of the project, types of information sought and the profiles of target readers (a fairly narrow group: the international team of researchers working on the project). Even this small-scale analysis presented here shows that, in all probability, such steps were not taken and, as a

result, translators were acting erratically, without any obvious strategies for making themselves visible, for engaging with the target readers and acting as ‘ambassadors’ of their own culture.

#### **Literature**

**1.** Venuti L. *Translator’s Invisibility. A History of Translation.* – London and New York: Routledge, 1995. **2.** Nord Ch. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained.* – Manchester: St Jerome, 1997. **3.** Jakobson R. ‘On linguistic aspects of translation’ in: Venuti L. *The Translation Studies Reader.* Londong and New York: Routledge, 2000 – P. 113 – 118. **4.** Cameron D. *Working with Spoken Discourse.* London: Sage Publications, 2001. **5.** Ross J. ‘Was that infinity or affinity? Qualitative research transcription as translation’ 2009 at: [http://jenrossity.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/ross2009\\_affini\\_v4.pdf](http://jenrossity.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/ross2009_affini_v4.pdf) (accessed on 15.10.10) **6.** Гарбовский Н.К. *Теория перевода.* – М.: Из-во Моск. ун-та, 2007.