

Untranslatable Words - National-Specific Element of Culture

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Abstract

There are about 6500 languages in the world. It is not surprising that some words found in one language cannot be translated into other languages using one word. Therefore, in the course of learning a language, we certainly encounter words which cannot be translated into our native language.

“All that the recipient has noticed in the text of foreign culture but can’t understand, that seems strange, unclear, erroneous to him and requires interpretation, serves as a signal of existence of national-specific elements of culture in the text, specifically, gaps” (Sorokyn & Markovina, 1998).

This article reviews the impossibility of translation in all cases related to lack of corresponding words, things and events.

Keywords: language, translation, phraseological units, slang

Introduction

For example, there are many “heartwarming” words in Russian language, which are untranslatable into other languages (cherished, beloved, naevoid, big-hearted etc.), diminutive, derogative, augmentative forms (honey, sweetheart, my light, honeybunch, cuddly, small head, huge head etc.), large number of “active” emotional verbs (grieve, feel sad, be distressed, be in the blues, blanche, feel ashamed, delight, be indignant, languish etc.). Various-hued versions of names (Marya, Masha, Mashenka, Mashunya) also serve as a sign of untranslatability.

Words such as “shamefully, awkwardly” are not directly translatable, they can be translated only in combination with other Russian words. Also, “grief” - strong emotional languor, worry, boredom or sadness; “why?” – person asking too many questions.

Weak usage of a word in one language sometimes forms phraseological units, while in another language it is a favorite word. In Russian language, “pickerel, crayfish” etc. are the headwords for several phraseological units (with a wave of a wand, better a small fish than an empty dish etc.). For example: Pull the devil by the tail. He’s pulling the devil by the tail from morning till night but has nothing.

There are youth slangs in all countries. For example,

a number of familiarities, even slang expressions used in everyday speech can be found in Russian language. Youth slang popular among students has been widely spread nowadays. For example: dorm – dormitory; chick – girl; guy – dude; pick up – charm etc.

Appearance of many slang expressions is connected with the aspiration of the youth to express their attitude to things, events more vividly, more emotionally. Evaluative words are derived from here: awesome, jaw-dropping, adamant, cool, neigh, bliss-out, drudge, grind away, sunbathe etc. They are spread in spoken language and are not found in dictionaries. Slang expressions have a vulgar hue. Use of slang expressions makes the speech rude, indecent. Appearance and spread of slang expressions is evaluated as a negative phenomenon in the development of national language. For example, in pilot slang, a belly is called “belly”. If the airplane nose goes sharply down, the airplane is “nodding” (Encyclopedia of a young philologist, 1984). Such is a miraculous power of a word. Power of a word may be either destructive or constructive. Unfamiliarity with colloquialisms is the cause of incomprehension of the Russian colloquial speech by students. To start speaking Russian, neutral words should be alternated with colloquialisms sometimes. The words like – fake (forgery), swindler (petty fraudster), pinch (steal), blabbing (lies), in bulk (many); dump on (accuse or reproach unfairly); more (stronger); spell (eyes), prophetic (prescient of the future) etc. have been introduced in

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the modern language from the past.

Here are examples of some untranslatable words of other international languages:

Akimbo – English. Standing with one's hands rested on sides with elbows pointed sideways.

Friolero – Spanish. A person susceptible to cold.

Depaysement – French. Feeling oneself as a foreigner in a foreign country.

Schilderwald – German. Street with so many signposts that one may get lost.

Culaccino – Italian. Sounds like coffee but actually this is a trace of wet glass on the table.

Saudade – Portugal. Sorrow or nostalgia for something unrealizable.

Yakamoz – Turkish. Reflection of some fish or other sea animals on the surface of water.

Inshallah – Arabic. Literally means "If Allah wills!" In Arabic, this word may have several meanings depending on the intonation. This word may also mean that some event is most likely destined or not destined to happen (analogy in the Georgian language "gmerti").

Shan znai – Chinese. Innovative companies some of which are rather successful and whose business is based on falsified or pirate goods (they are called "patents" in our country).

Each language perceives the reality in its own way. Lack of words is related to lack of things and events in Russian and other languages. Different nations cannot think with the same concepts. A certain nationally-hued element may be included in the concept but is not always able to change it. For normal communication it is necessary to know the national culture, everyday life, customs of the nation speaking the given language. For example, the word "горько!" (bitter) makes a Russian think of a wedding ("Now a kiss!") but other nations think of the direct meaning of this word. Such associations may be caused by emotional-evaluative connotations of one word in case of lack of such word in another language.

Untranslatable words are complemented by means of comments in the footnotes or are placed in the end of the book and clarify the national-specific elements of text to remove barriers in case of contact of two cultures.

Conclusion

The entire complex of problems of translatability of words is about how big the contextual, esthetic and pragmatic losses occurring during the translation are and how they are compensated.

Search of ways of translation of untranslatable words in the text is significant for the theory of speech activity in general as well as for the process of theory and practice in particular, as well as for training of translators as secondary linguistic identities adequately speaking both languages.

The following served as the research material for this article: selection from various dictionaries and result of the experiment carried out during practical classes of Russian language with students at the International Black Sea University.

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