

Svetlana CORCODEL
Lector asistent universitar
Universitatea de Stat din Moldova
Chişinău, Republica Moldova

Semantic Difficulties Encountered in the Process of Translating Literary Texts Titles

Abstract: The study stresses the importance of literary translation that is probably one of the most challenging types of translation because there are no or rare specialized words and terms for which dictionaries have exact equivalents.

In comparison with the scientific text, the literary text is full of emotions, feelings and colour. In addition, vocabulary reflects to a greater or lesser degree the author's personal evaluation of things or phenomena. Therefore, literary translation requires some competences and creativity.

The research offers a number of approaches to literary texts titles and presents the importance of rendering them accurately. It also outlines our goal to draw translators' attention to the title, which is many times neglected and considered unimportant.

Besides, literary texts titles require a special attention, as they do not only represent a name, which stays at the top of the page or at the first page of a book that is firstly judged by its cover and its title. They are a unique and entire world. That is why the translator shall firstly decode what is encoded in the original title and then in the same way to carefully encode the message into its translation that is to remain faithful to the work it entitles.

Keywords: title, literary translation, subject matter, translation techniques, semantic difficulties, lexical difficulties, structural difficulties

Rezumat: Studiul demonstrează importanța traducerii literare, care este considerată unul dintre cele mai provocatoare domenii

de traducere, deoarece sunt lipsă sau rare expresiile sau termenii pentru care dicționarele ar propune echivalente exacte.

În comparație cu textul științific, textul literar ne oferă emoții, sentimente și culoare. În plus, vocabularul textului literar reflectă mai mult sau mai puțin atitudinea personală a autorului față de evenimente sau fenomene. Prin urmare, traducerea literară necesită anumite competențe și creativitate.

Cercetarea propune un șir de abordări ale titlurilor textelor literare din perspectiva traducerii, ori traducerea acestora cu acuratețe absolută este foarte importantă. De asemenea, un alt obiectiv este traducerea titlurilor textelor literare, care sunt, de multe ori, neglijate și considerate puțin valoroase.

Titlurile textelor literare necesită o atenție deosebită, deoarece nu reprezintă doar un nume, care apare în partea de sus a copertei sau pe prima pagină a cărții, ci imaginea creată și apreciată de cititor. Titlurile textelor literare sunt o lume unică, specială. Iată de ce, traducătorul, mai întâi, va decoda titlul original și, numai după, va codifica cu atenție mesajul în textul țintă cu acuratețe și fidelitate textului sursă.

Cuvinte-cheie: titlul, traducere literară, conținut, tehnici de traducere, dificultăți semantice, dificultăți lexicale, dificultăți de structură

Introduction

Literary texts titles require a special attention, as they do not only represent a name, which stays on the first page of a book or at the top of the page. They represent a part of that work and this means that they might also contain some hidden messages or some hints that will help the reader understand better that work. That is why the translator shall firstly decode what is encoded in the original title and then in the same way carefully encode the message into its translation.

However, is the title only entitling a work or it represents something more than simply a name? In order to find an answer to the question we shall find what the opinion of other linguists regarding this topic is. Peter Newmark recommends to translate the title only after the entire literary work is rendered because many times the meaning of the title is closely

related to the work it entitles and can be mistranslated if the translator does not know the content of the work (Newmark, *A Textbook of Translation* 2).

Many times translators do not pay attention to what they translate and can automatically change the meaning of the word when translating it. False friends or the tendencies of calquing represent some of the causes of this problem. Many times, we use calquing automatically because we think that it sounds well. However, the inadequate use of calquing can cause serious problems to the meaning, especially when we speak about titles. We understand the problems related to the meaning as semantic difficulties that can be encountered in the process of translating literary texts titles.

Source of Examples

Meaning is probably the most important part of the word and it may cause many problems, semantic problems, to translator. In order to render a phrase or sentence one must firstly understand its meaning because many times it can be composed by the words which taken one by one have a different meaning in comparison with that communicated by the phrase they form. This is the case of proverbs, idioms and colocations. If a translator does not understand the meaning, the translation performed will be mistaken (Newmark, *op. cit.* 43). Therefore, when translating a title, it is very important to understand what this title wants to communicate to the reader and what its function is. That is why many times one has to read the entire text or book, analyse it, and only then translate the title.

All the analysed literary texts titles present semantic difficulties mostly because they are phrases characteristic to the English language and many times, it is very hard to find a perfect Romanian equivalent, which will have both: an appropriate form and content as the exact Romanian equivalent to the meaning used by the author cannot be found in dictionaries. That is why the translators have to imply their creativity. However, beside phrases and idioms, there are words that can as well cause confusion and ambiguity or words, which target language equivalents are, not appropriate and do not correspond to the message aimed by the author.

According to Myers & Simms (*The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms* 77), a title can stipulate a *condition* (*If You See Me Comin* by Adrian Mitchell), make a *request* (*Look at Me* by Anita Brookner), or launch an *invitation* (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* by Anita Desai), all of which include direct addresses to the reader. Nevertheless, the title can attract the

reader's attention also by indicating a *moral* (*Eating People is Wrong* by Malcolm Bradbury), showing an *emotion* (*No Laughing Matter* by Angus Wilson), or setting up the *reader's expectation* (*Taking Off My Clothes* by Carolyn Forché).

In this way, we can say that the title is not only a name by which a certain work can be recognised or a set of words put at the beginning of the text, it is a part of that work. It is the first thing we see about the text or the book it entitles and like any other name it carries some characteristics of the work it stands for. The title can tell us many things about the work. It can suggest us the theme of the work, the name of a character, the feelings of the author, the type of work or its genre. It is a hint to the text or book we want to read.

Thus, title translation is one of the most challenging processes and there can appear many linguistic difficulties that have to be faced by the translator during the interpreting process.

Contrastive Analysis of Literary Texts Titles Translation

Titles of literary works differ from other types of titles because literary works are a part of the field that is mostly based on creativity and imagination. Therefore, these titles are many times more than they appear to be. Each title is chosen carefully to render accurately the message encoded in it by its author.

Now, dealing with translating a literary text title we shall mention that many times the message communicated by the title can only be guessed after reading the entire work and in such cases translating the title literally is a huge mistake as the original title and the translated one are completely different, conveying two different messages. Therefore, we probably shall follow Peter Newmark's advice, who says that the titles shall be left "untranslated until the rest of assignment is completed" (Newmark, *op. cit.* 148).

Title translation is probably one of the most challenging activities especially when we speak about the title of literary works as it should sound attractive, allusive, suggestive, even if it is a proper name, and should usually bear some relation to the original, if only for identification. Besides, the translators shall remember that a literary text title is an entire world that has its own characteristics, which have to be considered and taken into account when they perform its translation. Therefore, translating a literary

text title implies creativity and a certain responsibility from the translator because many times the success of a book depends on its title and if it is not translated adequately, the book, no matter how interesting it may be, risks remaining unsuccessful (Briffa, *Stylistic Creativity when Translating Titles* 34). Thus, sometimes translators has to do some research to find more about the author, and the book which title they translate, in order to be able to provide a good translation. That is why there are translation techniques and strategies that are meant to help the translator overcome these difficulties. One of the cases of some titles translation is *modulation*. Such a difficulty can be found in Evelyn Waugh's title of the novel *Scoop* that was rendered into Romanian as *Bomba zilei* (Waugh, *Bomba zilei*, trad. de Viorica Boitor). If we look up in the dictionary the word **scoop**, we will learn that it has two meanings. One of them designates a tool used in digging out and moving a substance. The other meaning is related to news and states that it is a story or piece of news discovered and published by one newspaper before the others (*Oxford Dictionaries. Language Matters*, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>). In order to know which of the two meanings is used in this title, the translators have to read firstly the entire novel. In this way, they will find out that this is a story about a writer of nature columns who is sent by mistake in the zone of war where he manages to do some very good news with the help of some other journalists and returns home as a world-renowned reporter. It becomes obvious that the author used the word *scoop* with reference to news. However, the Romanian dictionary does not give an equivalent to the word *scoop* with the same reference. Therefore, the translator had probably to do some research in the journalism in order to find what the Romanian equivalent for such kind of news is. The Romanian translation *Bomba zilei* as we see renders the idea very well, although not exactly. It supposes an unexpected and surprising piece of news, but which is not necessarily published by one newspaper before another. Its meaning is more related to the event of the day. On the other hand, we can suppose that if it is the event of the day, there can be a competition between newspapers for the possibility of having a better and a quicker reportage on this. In this way, we can say that the translator found a very good equivalent to the original title.

Another example of a good translation of the literary work title can be considered the title of Jack Higgins' novel *Sure Fire* which was rendered into Romanian as *Țintă sigură* (Higgins, *Țintă sigură*, trad de Bogdan Pope). This is also a title translated by means of *modulation*. *Sure fire* is an expression

which supposes something that is certain or likely to succeed. As we see *țintă sigură* renders the same idea even if *țintă* and *fire* are two different words, with two different meanings. Translated into English, *țintă* would sound as *target*, which represents the consequence of the *fire*. However, it is not advisable to translate literally this title, as the Romanian equivalent *foc sigur* does not have the same effect as *țintă sigură* and does not render the message aimed by the author accurately because this expression can be interpreted differently. If the English word *fire* gains another meaning when it is used together with the adjective *sure*, in Romanian it does not. Therefore, the Romanian reader could interpret *foc sigur* as a safe fire, which is made by someone somewhere in order to probably get warm. That is why we can say that this translation of the title is perfect, as it renders exactly what the author wanted to communicate to the readers.

George Orwell's novel title *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* could as well cause some difficulties related to the meaning to translators. There might be the tendency of interpreting the phrase *keep flying* literally and a non-native speaker could think that *the Aspidistra* is a name of an airship, which is a big mistake. The entire title of G. Orwell's novel represents a modified English expression in which the word *Aspidistra* is used instead of *the flag*. The expression *keep the flag flying* means to refuse surrender or to achieve success, while *aspidistra* is the name of a house plant that is usually used with reference to the "middle-class gentility and conventionality" (*Oxford Dictionaries. Language Matters*, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>). Therefore, we can say that the title is an encouragement or an exhortation of not letting the middle class give up. The Romanian translator decided to use for *keep flying* the expression *să trăiască* which is usually used to wish somebody a long and beautiful life. The word *aspidistra* was *transliterated* without making any concretizations in order to probably let the readers form their own opinion on what *aspidistra* might signify. In this way, we can say that *Aspidistra, să trăiască!* is a perfect translation of G. Orwell's novel title and one can hardly imagine a better rendering (Orwell, *Aspidistra sa trăiască!* trad de Mihnea Gafița).

There are words that can as well cause confusion and ambiguity or words which target language equivalents are not very appropriate and do not correspond to the message aimed by the author. One of the titles that present such kind of difficulty is *The House on the Borderland* – the title of a novel written by William Hope Hodgson. The primary meaning of the word *borderland* suggests that this is an area near the line separating two

countries or territories (*Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). The translator chose to *replace* this word with *marginea Abisului*, which rendered into English stays for “*the edge of the chasm*”. If we read W. H. Hodgson’s work, we will find out that this is a horror novel telling a story of a man who lived in a house located on the edge of an abyss. Two travelers found the diary, in which he wrote all the weird things that were happening to him as he lived in that house. Therefore, we can guess that the translator rendered the title in this way, to give a hint to the content of the novel and as well to add a note of mystery. Maybe, rendered literally, *borderland* in Romanian would sound rather too technical and the effect produced on the target reader would be different than the one of the original title on the source reader. In this way, *marginea Abisului* is more appropriate as it is not only suggestive but as well attractive. But, let us suppose, that the translator would use instead of *marginea Abisului* the word *granița* and the title would sound as *Casa de la graniță*. Knowing the content, we would say that the author meant the border between the two worlds: imaginary (or the evil) one and reality. On the other hand, the target readers could interpret the word *granița* in its primary meaning, as line separating two countries, and they could lose their interest in reading the book. That is why; taking into account the genre of the work, we shall say that *Casa de la marginea Abisului* is more attractive. (Hodgson, *Casa de la marginea Abisului*, trad de Anca Florea).

The adjective *good* from the title of Ford Madox Ford’s novel *The Good Soldier* can as well cause some semantic difficulties. *Good* is used very often in many different situations having positive connotations. It can signify “*very satisfactory and pleasant*”, “*healthy*”, “*successful*”, “*kind or helpful*”, “*morally right*” or “*able to be trusted*” (*Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). Such can be the soldier from the title. However, one has to read the entire work in order to identify which of the above meanings fits the soldier. In this way, we can say that the Romanian translator wanted to *concretize* and *emphasize* the qualities of the soldier and rendered the title as *Un soldat de nădejde* (Ford, M. F. *Un soldat de nădejde*, trad de Florenta Simion). The adjectival phrase *de nădejde* is used usually to refer to a person whom you can rely on, whom you can trust. This coincides with one of the meanings of the word *good*. Consequently, we can say that the translator did not alter the meaning of the source word, but *emphasized* it. Another thing that we can notice related to this title is the article *the*, which was replaced in the translation with *un* (a). *The* is a definite article

which, when is used before a noun, refers to a particular person or thing. *Un (a)*, on the other hand, is used when we are not referring to a certain thing or person (*Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). In this way, the Romanian version is more general, pointing to any soldier who can be reliable and, in the same time, creating an image of such a soldier, while the English title refers to one particular soldier.

Another word, which can cause difficulties relating to the meaning, is the noun *code* of the Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse's novel title *The Code of the Woosters*. According to Cambridge dictionary, the word *code* has at least three meanings. It can designate a system of words, letters and signs used to hide a message; a set of rules or principles used by a certain group or society or the genetic material in DNA (*Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). If the reader does not know the content of the work, he or she can very well presume that any of these meanings can be attributed to our title because the words, which form the title, do not point to any of the meanings. Consequently, once again, in order to render the title accurately the translator must know what the work is about and what or who *the Woosters* are. The Romanian translation of Wodehouse's novel title is *Codul de onoare al Wooster-ilor* (Wodehouse, *Codul de onoare al Wooster-ilor*, trad de Carmen Toader). As we can notice, the translator decided to specify what kind of code is that, without revealing still whether *the Woosters* represent a family or a company or something else. Therefore, we can presume that this is an invitation to read the novel and to find this out ourselves.

The title of the novel written by Clive Staples Lewis *Surprised by Joy* contains as well a word that can be very confusing – the noun *Joy*. We cannot guess at once whether this is the noun expressing happiness or the name of a person. That is why, it is very important to know the plot of the work. In our case, it is an autobiography. The events described happened in the author's spiritual and intellectual life when he was in his early thirties. The word *Joy* is used here in its primary meaning **-happiness-** because all his life the main character, in our case the author, was looking for the *joy* and actually something very interesting happened: in 1957 – two years after publishing the work – he married the love of his life whose name was Joy (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://www.britannica.com>). The translator rendered the title into Romanian as *Surprins de bucurie* (Lewis, *Surprins de bucurie*, trad. de Emanuel Conțac). As we see, the Romanian *equivalent* does not cause any ambiguities. Actually, it could not cause even if the

translator wanted to, because there is not such a word in Romanian, that would mean happiness and at the same time be a name. That is why the translators could only use the exact *equivalent* and for this, they needed to know the plot of the story.

Prepositions also represent a category of words, which can cause semantic difficulties. Many times an English preposition is translated differently in Romanian, especially if we speak about the preposition *of*. *Of* is usually used to show possession. However, besides possession, it can express the origin, the content, the position, the characteristics of a thing or a person, or it can mean what something contains. Consequently, because of this it has many Romanian *equivalents*. It can be translated as *al* or *a* (or showing possession something that is typical); *de*, *despre* or *cu* (expressing what it contains) or *din* (origin) (*Dicționar Englez – Român online*, <http://hallo.ro/?l=ro>). In this way, it can create some ambiguities and knowing the content of the work can help the translator choose the appropriate rendering of the preposition.

Given all this, let us take for example the title of Will Self's novel *The Book of Dave*. Without knowing the story, we may suppose that the preposition *of* may express any of the following ideas: the book belongs to Dave; it is about Dave or Dave wrote it. In this way only reading the work we may find what the meaning of the preposition *of* is. If we look at the Romanian translation, which is *Cartea lui Dave*, we see that it also does not tell us for sure whether this is Dave's book or it is written by him (Self, *Cartea lui Dave*, trad. de Eugen B. Marian). Consequently, we may suppose that the translator decided to let the readers themselves discover the answer to this question.

The preposition *to* as well as *on* are also rendered differently depending on the context they are used. For instance, used in Edward Morgan Forster's novel title, *A passage to India*, the preposition *to* expresses a destination and was translated as *în* – *O călătorie în India* (Forster, *O călătorie în India*, trad. de Liliana Pamfil-Teodoreanu). The title of Laurence Sterne's novel *Journal to Eliza* contains the preposition *to* that was translated as *pentru* – *Jurnalul pentru Eliza* (Sterne, *Jurnalul pentru Eliza*, trad. de Mihai Miroiu), showing that the journal is addressed to Eliza. The same is the case of the preposition *on*, which in Zadie Smith's novel title *On Beauty*, has the meaning of *about* and is translated *despre* – *Despre Frumusețe* (Smith, *Despre frumusețe*, trad. de Alina Scurtu). But, the title of Ian Fleming's novel *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* the same preposition, *on*, supposes that someone is performing some

secret activities for *Her Majesty* and is translated as *în – În Serviciul Secret al Maiestății Sale* (Fleming, *În serviciul secret al maiestății sale*, trad. de Anca Nistor). Consequently, the prepositions can be very tricky and the translator shall always pay a due attention to them and to the way in which they may change the meaning of the entire title.

Another category of titles that could cause semantic difficulties consists of titles, which were *replaced* with new ones in the target language. We have noticed that new titles were completely different from the original ones beginning with their structures and finishing with their meanings. Let us take for example the title of Ali Smith's novel *There But For The*. It was rendered into Romanian as *Era să fiu eu* (Smith, *Era să fiu eu*, trad. de Carmen Scarlet). At first sight, these two titles seem to be completely different: the original one containing an adverb, two prepositions and a definite article, while the translated title representing a Romanian sentence. However, if we do some research we will find that the original title consists of the titles of the novel's chapters and represents the first part of the English expression *there but for the grace of God* which is used "when something bad that has happened to someone else could have happened to you". The Romanian title was chosen in the same way. It also comprises the titles of the translated novel's chapters, each word representing the first word with which each chapter begins. It renders as well the same idea as the entire English expression, although its meaning is different from that of the original title. However, if the translator rendered the title using whatever translation technique the translated title would not tell anything to the reader, who is not aware about the English saying (Clifford, *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide* 52). In this way, the title would sound rather confusing to the Romanian reader.

We know that a successful translation can be judged by two criteria: faithfulness or fidelity and transparency. The first criterion supposes the use of the exact equivalents of the source language words that have to resemble the same structure. This is what theory says. However, it is not always the case in practice. In order to meet the second criteria many times the structure of the word is changed as well as the word itself and the examples provided are a sound proof for the above utterance.

Conclusions

The process of translation always implies challenges, especially regarding literary texts titles translation. The title is not only an element of the text or a set of words put at the beginning of the text, it is a complex system with its components, every of which has its own role in creating and giving a meaning to the literary text. Thus, it is very important to remember the main peculiarities of the literary texts titles translation, because the message they carry is not to be spoiled when rendering them into the target language.

After analysing all the examples presented above we may say that the semantic difficulties are on the top of the list and they can be overcome only if the translators implies their creativity and responsibility and not harm the success of the book and the public acceptance of the literary work. Moreover, sometimes doing some research on the author's life and activity might help in identifying their intentions of entitling the work in the way they did.

In conclusion, we dare say that our analysis proves that the translators have managed to render faithfully the literary texts titles that embody message, culture, intrigue and colour.

Bibliography

- Briffa, Charles, Curuana Rose-Marie, *Stylistic Creativity when Translating Titles*, Malta, University of Malta, 2009.
- Clifford, E Landers, *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*, New Jersey City University, Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2001.
- Myers, Jack Elliott & Simms, Michael, *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*, New York & London, Longman, 1989, <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/1485771>, (accessed February 22, 2022)
- Newmark, Peter, *A Textbook of Translation*, Essex, Longman, 2003.

Dictionaries

- Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, Cambridge University Press,
Available at: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> (accessed February 21, 2022).
- Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.,
Available at: <http://www.britannica.com/> (accessed February 22, 2022).
- Dicționar Englez – Român online* Hallo.ro, Available at: <http://hallo.ro/?l=ro> (accessed February 15, 2022).

Oxford Dictionaries, Language Matters, Oxford University Press,
Available at: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com> (accessed February 21, 2022).

Corpus

- Fleming, Ian, *În serviciul secret al maiestății sale*, trad. de Anca Nistor, București, Rao Books, 2002.
- Ford, Madox, *Un soldat de nădejde*, trad. de Florenta Simion, București, All, 2012.
- Forster, Edward Morgan, *O călătorie în India*, trad. Liliana Pamfil-Teodoreanu, Iași, Polirom, 2014.
- Hodgson, William Hope, *Casa de la marginea Abisului*, trad. de Anca Florea, București, Corint, 2014.
- Lewis, C. live Staples, *Surprins de bucurie*, trad. de Emanuel Coțac, București, Humanitas, 2008.
- Self, Will, *Cartea lui Dave*, trad. Eugen B. Marian, București, All, 2010.
- Smith, Ali, *Era să fiu eu*, trad. Carmen Scarlet, București, Univers, 2014.
- Smith, Zadie, *Despre frumusețe*, trad. Alina Scurtu, București, Leda, 2008.
- Sterne, Laurence, *Jurnalul pentru Eliza*, trad. de Mihai Miroiu, București, Rao Books, 2006.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville, *Codul de onoare al Wooster-ilor*, trad. Carmen Toader, Iași, Polirom, 2004.