The Challenge of Political Correctness in the Translation of "Sensitive" Texts

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The Challenge of Political Correctness in the Translation of "Sensitive" Texts: Translations must fully render the meaning of words and expressions from the source language, without losing any of their cultural connotations. In the case of "politically correct" terms in English, difficulties spring from deep cultural differences in the understanding of race, religious or genre problems. This paper is aiming to present several examples of such difficulties, suggesting theoretical and practical ways of solving them.
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I. Introduction

In the last few decades, the role of the translator (or interpreter) has changed dramatically. From the simple mediating, anonymous activity of the past, to the highly sophisticated, highly technologized, highly knowledgeable wizard of today the translator has travelled a very long and complicated road. But throughout the history of this profession, one thing has never changed: the translator has constantly acted as a mediator between cultures.

Nowadays, this mediating role grows in significance, mainly due to the fact that sharing cultural information acts as a major incentive for communication and cooperation. In a growingly globalised society, knowing more about others, from a cultural point of view, has become essential. The European businessman aiming for success in Muslim or Hindu countries, for instance, must first get acquainted to specific local requirements and taboos; similarly, the European translator who aims at widespread acknowledgement must first learn about cultural differences, before making them known – and understood – by his or her readers. He (or she) must identify with the source text culture and find the right balance between the *accurate* shift into the target language and a *degree of acceptability* that would determine a rapid adoption of the translated text into the target culture.

The modern world preserves the cultural wounds of the past. The clash between races and religions has made it clear that a solution must be found - and soon. The work of politicians is no longer enough – so linguists have found it their duty to join in this communication effort.

The concept of "*political correctness*", initially used by the American legal system in the late 1700s, has slowly turned into a global linguistic effort meant to promote more tolerant human relationships. The concept was quickly adopted by many cultures, through the calque method, possibly because it sounded right and seemed to involve politics as well; nevertheless, in many languages (including Romanian) the resulting term fails to convince[1].

In linguistic terms, being politically correct generally means preserving a moderate attitude and the due respect in matters regarding genre, religion or race – that is, speaking or writing without hurting other people's feelings. But the initial admirable efforts later turned to exaggerations, sometimes embarrassing, if not even ridiculous.

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[1] In French, the equivalent term is "*politiquement correct*"; in German – *politisch korrekt*; in Russian it is rendered by "*политкорректность*", while the Italians call it "*politicamente corretto*". Romanians have two variants for it: "*corect din punct de vedere **politic***" and "***politic** corect*" but they both miss the original meaning, as the term "***politic***" only refers to politics, and never to language. The connotative element related to the politicization of language is not obvious in Romanian. In an attempt to satirize political correctness exaggerations in language use, the Japanese have chosen a functional type of translation, using the term "*kotobagari*" (meaning "*word hunting*").

Irrespective of how ridiculous this topic may seem in theory, the problem of translating such terms from English is a very serious one. Most such terms have a deep cultural connotation, thus making it even more difficult to choose, in the target language, the "right words" or euphemisms to express the same meaning as in the source language.

II. Difficulties in translating "politically correct" and sensitive terms from English
II.1. Theoretical premises

In order to be appropriate, any translation must follow certain rules and theoretical requirements and, apart from certain innate qualities (the ability of learning foreign languages, of making quick shifts from a source language into a target language, of intuitively choosing the best from a number of possible variants), the translator must also master a theoretical frame that is sure to assist a work well done.

In what "politically correct" terms are concerned, two major theoretical topics could represent the basis for the present paper: Gideon Toury's comments [4] on the choice between *accuracy* and *acceptability*, adapted to the translation requirements of any "sensitive" text, and Pinker's opinions about what he calls the "*euphemism treadmill*".

Toury's research is focused mainly on Bible translations, but the idea that a translation should not simply follow the line of *accuracy*, but also conform to the cultural specificity of the target language, in order to be *accepted* by target readers, has given rise to a heated debate as well as to a number of critical opinions. Nida's famous comment [2] on the biblical story of "Jesus walking on water" (which, according to this rule, would risk being translated into "walking on sand" or "on a swamp" in geographical areas where "water" is scarce) is only an example.

Acceptability is a strong criterion in a religious context; therefore a "politically correct" translation of such a text should be in conformity with the cultural rules of the target cultural space. However, in the case of translations, the chosen equivalent cannot move away from the initial meaning of the respective word or expression in the source language variant, leading to misinterpretations or inaccurate rendering of the core meaning. A translation aiming to be adequate in the context of the target culture is focusing on the ultimate goal (gaining the approval of readers). Also, certain target languages may not include enough synonyms or variants for a chain of terms expressing the same concept at different stages of its evolution (e.g. the successive terms referring, in American English, to people belonging to the now called Afro-American community).

The topic of successive terms denominating the same category, being replaced in turn due to the fact that the usage of those words in certain contexts may fill them, one by one, with a negative connotation was largely treated by the Canadian experimental psychologist Steven C. Pinker [3] who called this development a "*euphemism treadmill*". Furthermore, Pinker refers to some of the deeper reasons for the change of attitude against certain words – especially as seen in a context: "*Most words and parts of words have many meanings, and when we listen to someone speak, our brains have to find the right ones. Some recent laboratory experiments indicate that this is a two-stage process.* [….] *First, all the meanings of a word, including inappropriate ones, light up [....] in the brain.*"Only later, the author adds, "*misinterpretation is repressed by our analysis of the context*". Starting from what seems to be a genuine effort to avoid any sensitive topic, euphemisms lose their initial value and become negative denominants themselves, then being replaced by something else. This chain development is specific especially for the American culture today; linguistic efforts to satisfy everybody's ego may lead to funny results though, as shown in some of the examples below.

II.2. Solutions for translating "sensitive" texts

Both translation theory and common sense will agree that a good translation must rely on thorough cultural background knowledge on the part of the translator. Linguistic

performance is never enough if it is not doubled by a detailed research on the general topic, as well as by an unbiased attitude towards "sensitive" topics. The most significant difficulty, in what politically correct terms are concerned, is the fact that they seem to grow in number by the day, and translators possibly regret the absence of relevant dictionaries, although these would probably be subject to endless add-ups and changes. In English, several topics arguably require constant updating to keep up the pace with public attitude: gender, religion (and the festivals and celebrations related to it), social status (including names of professions) and disabilities of any kind. Racial issues stepped further back from the limelight once the reference to geographical specificity (*Afro-American, Asian-American, Native American* etc.) replaced the old pejorative words.

As for the Romanian counterparts of these categories, one can surely be excluded, due to the fact that the *male component* is mostly irrelevant in job names; some of them preserve the masculine form (due to the influence of French in earlier periods of the formation of our language) irrespective of the gender of the person involved (e.g. "*senator*", "*deputat*", "*profesor*", "*avocat*", "*rector*" etc.), while others have specific derivate forms for each gender (*actor/actriță*; *doctor/doctoriță, polițist/polițistă* etc.).

But what should a translator do when faced with job names such as "*transparent-wall maintenance officer*", "*sanitation engineer*" or even "*custodian*" – that is, the current replacements for "window cleaner" or "janitor" respectively? Any previous knowledge on army and engineering matters or museum clerks can be of no help, and the translator must rely exclusively on his/her understanding of the context.

Bible exegetes hold it that the word of God must be preserved as such, without any misinterpretations - but what is to be done if the modern translator into English chooses to replace the word "*man*" (ignoring its alternative generalizing character) with "*people*", in examples such as "*Man does not live by bread alone*" (excerpt from Matthew 4.4, in the 1996 NIV Inclusive Language Edition). Even the *Christmas season* has undergone appropriate tailoring, as the variant "*Winter Holyday*" (or "*Winterval*" in Britain) grows in importance. But the translation of the latter variant would completely lose its magic significance (as we, Romanians, were well aware during Communist times, when Moş Crăciun, the equivalent for Santa Claus- Father Christmas, was replaced by a neutral *Moş Gerilă* roughly translatable by *Father Frosty*, impossible to link to Christmas celebrations). References such as AD or BC may well become inadequate in the near future, and they are sometimes replaced by "*common era*" (or CE) and "*before common era*" (BCE). True enough, we live among followers of other religions - but so far nobody has thought of replacing the Hindu Diwali (a festival of lights), the Ramadan or the Hannuka with politically correct terms that would also satisfy Christians. Also, the word "common" is often associated with the meaning of "average" or "ordinary" – both with a possibly derogatory connotation.

Translation difficulties are more obvious in cases such as the chains of terms (euphuism treadmill) related to certain disabilities. Bibliographical references cite widely known examples such as: "*lame – crippled – handicapped – disabled – physically challenged – with differing abilities*" – an impressive number of variants that would pose a challenge even for the brightest of translators. Such a translation would surely use archaisms and the technique of compensation in order to cover for the existing white spots in the target language corpus. However, other difficulties may arise when some of the above words are used in completely different contexts, as shown in the following quote from Wikipedia [5]:

"*The word "lame" from above, having faded from the vernacular was revitalized as a slang word generally meaning "not living up to expectations". Connotation of a euphemism can also be subject-specific. The term "handicap" was in common use to describe a physical disability; it gained common use in sports and games to describe a scoring advantage given to a player who has a disadvantageous standing in ability, and this definition has remained common, even though the term as describing physical disability*

has mostly faded from common use. One exception to this is in the United States when designating "handicapped" parking spaces for such individuals".

Due to space restrictions the following table presents only a few examples of the evolution of certain words or terms under the rule of political correctness, as well as a suggested translation into Romanian. However, the author has already gathered a significant number of such examples (as well as quotations and literary excerpts) which may be the basis for a future extended glossary on the topic. The effects of globalization could have certain effects on the development of this specific topic, and many words as we know them today could cease to be used, for the same reason.

Original term	Politically correct variant (EN)	Romanian translation
Cripple (polite: lame)	*handicapped – disabled – physically challenged – with differing abilities*	*Olog - şontâc – handicapat – cu dizabilităţi – cu nivel diferit de abilitate* (there is no equivalent for "physically challenged" – which, in a calque translation, would be "*cu provocări de ordin fizic*" and **would make no sense** in Romanian; the first two variants are ***regional terms*** with a negative connotation)
Window cleaner	*Maintenance worker - transparent-wall maintenance officer*	***Spălător vitrine şi geamuri*** (a descriptive term for what this job involves)
Garbage man	*Nightman – sanitation personnel – sanitation engineer*	***Vidanjor – muncitor la salubritate*** - the term is considered neutral, and the descriptive variant is ***curăţitor canale***
Used cars	*Second-hand cars – pre-owned vehicles*	***Maşini uzate - maşini la mâna a doua*** (**no updated variant** for the latest politically correct term
Torture	*Painful procedures - Interrogation support - Enhanced interrogation technique – Persuasion (?!?)*	***Tortură – tehnici extreme de interogare*** (but the latter is very rarely used, except for official documents
Poverty support	*Poor relief – welfare*	***Ajutor pentru săraci*** (descriptive, initially with no negative connotation) – ***stipendie – asistenţă socială***
Fat, obese	*Overweight - physically challenged - heavyset – person of substance – fat-positive – heavily laden - horizontally challenged*	***Gras – solid – supraponderal*** (the last term is also used in medical definitions; no equivalent yet for the latest English term - „positive" has a + connotation and is only used to mean „optimistic")
What the hell is going on?	*What the darn…/ what the heck…/ what the dickens…etc.*	***Dracu'*** (regional expression gradually replaced by "***naiba***" - no evolutions equivalent for the En term
Homosexual	*Fag(got) – Queer – Fairy - Gay – belonging to a sexual minority*	***Homosexual – Sodomit – Pederast - Homo – Gay*** (the English term was preferred as such - more neutral)

Original term	Politically correct variant (EN)	Romanian translation
American	*Citizen of the US* (for fear of hurting the feelings of Canadians, as well as of Southern Americans)	In Romanian **American** continues to refer to US citizens and no alternative term is being used
Midget	*Short person – vertically challenged*	Pitic
Homeless	*Residentially flexible*	Vagabond (pejorative), om al străzii
Body odour (stink)	*Nondiscretionary fragrance*	Putoare, miros urât
Being wrong	*Being differently logical*	A nu avea dreptate (neutral)
Mutt (a person of mixed racial descent)	*Multiracial - Mongrol*	Corcitură (pejorative) - Metis

Conclusions

The above list of examples could continue forever. New words of the same kind (rarely used by those whose sensibilities are at stake) are being invented and applauded. The euphemistic speech trend of the 20th and 21st centuries has long become a challenge for native speakers, as well as for learners of English. Pushing the limits of the morally accepted language becomes a problem for any translator. In many cases, changes of terminology do not trigger changes at the level of mentality or social behaviour; consequently, the deep causes of discrimination continue to exist. Although the role of the translator is not that of lobbying for moral issues, he/she can only abide by the rules which govern the language in consonance with the society they live in at a certain moment in time.

From the translator's point of view, this will continue to be a challenge in the effort to produce the best possible alternative of any source text. The linguistic and cultural transfer of such texts must rely on a thorough knowledge of both concepts and translation strategies and, in approaching a source text, the translator must remember Roland Barthes' words [1], whereby any text "… *is itself already a plurality of other texts, of infinite codes or, more precisely, whose origins are lost*".

References

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[3] Pinker, Steven C., Racist Language, *Real and Imagined*, in New York Times, Feb. 2, 1999. For more detailed information about the author and his works read Steven Pinker's website http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu

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[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism

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Докладът е рецензиран.