

## THE INTERFACE OF PRAGMATICS AND TRANSLATION STUDIES

**Imola Katalin Nagy**

**Assist. Prof., PhD, Sapientia University of Tîrgu Mureş**

*Abstract: In this study we wish to discuss the relationship which exists between pragmatics, on the one hand, and translation studies, on the other hand. Our purpose is to highlight the importance of those pragmatic issues which are important from the prespective of a translation student/translator. We take a look at the concepts of pragmatic meaning, pragmatic text, pragmatic translation, etc.*

*Keywords: pragmatics, translation, pragmatic translation, pragmatic text, pragmatic meaning*

In this study we would like to make a brief presentation of the relationship which exists between pragmatics and translation studies, introducing those basic notions that researchers have identified as being the concepts shaping the borderline between these two segments of linguistic studies: *context, pragmatic meaning, pragmatic text, semantic translation vs. communicative/pragmatic translation, and pragmatic approach to language.*

Daniela Sorea, in her book *Translation. Theory and practice* lists some of the main theories of meaning, among which she mentions the so-called *use* theory of meaning, strongly connected with the pragmatic view upon language. Pragmatics deals with meaning not as a mental representation, nor as a relation between a symbol (word, phrase or the other categories) and an object or an entity designated by that symbol. "In other words, pragmatics situates language within wider social and cultural settings and behavioural patterns and, while laying heavy stress on the context of the verbal exchanges, it deals with the way people exploit words and combinations of words, with the actions actual users perform in the act of communication. The meaning of a linguistic expression is given by its use, under certain circumstances, where interlocutors nourish specific intentions and pursue specific goals." (Sorea, 2007. 23-24) Interactions like thanks, curses, greetings, praying, describing people and objects, narrating events and stories, giving orders, expressing invitations, making assumptions, speculations, hypotheses, telling jokes, idioms, figurative language are all aspects which might make translating from one language to another troublesome.

For translators, it is of utmost importance to situate words and phrases into specific contexts. When translating from one language into another and to avoid misinterpretation and mistranslation, it is essential to correctly identify the local context of utterances and speech acts. Specific contextual locations may provide different readings, thus different meanings, which rely heavily on the distinct configuration of spatial and temporal elements. "For

instance, a very simple utterance such as *Are you going to buy this car?* may trigger, among a variety of other responses, something like *Are you nuts?*. Such a reply could mean opposite things in different contexts: if the car is a bargain and meets with the buyer's expectations, it will obviously mean *Isn't it obvious I will?*. If the car is a write-out and the required price is outrageously high, it will mean exactly the opposite: i.e. *Isn't it obvious I won't?* If it is April 1, and one asks *Who are you trying to kid?* This may count as an honest question, decodable as *Who is the target of your mystification?* On any other context, *Who are you trying to kid?* could be perceived as an expression of disbelief." (Sorea, 2007. 27)

A specific translation problem that is connected to the pragmatic meaning of utterances is failure to identify the context which makes it clear whether the meaning is literal or figurative. "In a context where participants complain of the harsh winter and biting frost, an utterance such as *You've got cold feet* could simply be a constative remark or maybe an expression of thoughtfulness and sympathy. In the context of a wedding which is about to take place, telling the groom *You've got cold feet* will indicate he groom experiencing pre-marital nervousness, eve fright." (Sorea, 2007. 27) The same applies Hungarian expressions like *nagy kanállal enni* (preparing to get married) or Romanian idiomatic expressions like *piatra din casă* (referring to girls who cannot find a husband).

When translating, a translator facilitates an act of communication between SL speakers/writers and TL hearers/readers. The guidelines that matter in the process of translation are the choice of combinations of words, the grammatical structure, the contextual meaning, and the communicative purpose of the source text. Yet, translation is not a simple linguistic conversion between languages; it is also a cultural and aesthetic act. Decoding the proper meaning of an utterance is the key to good translation: *I painted the walls white* or *I painted the white walls* in not the same utterance, therefore when translating them into Romanian, for instance, translators should be careful with choosing between *Am vopsit pereții albi* or *Am vopsit pereții în alb*.

Communicative translation is oriented towards the needs of the TL recipient. Communicative translation contrasts with word-for-word translation, literal translation. "When producing a communicative translation, the translator is permitted greater freedom to interpret ST and will consequently smooth over irregularities of style, remove ambiguities and even correct the author's factual errors. ... Examples of text-types for which this mode of translation would be appropriate include journalistic writing, textbooks, public notices and indeed most non-literary genres." (Shuttleworth-Cowie, 2007. 22).

According to Shuttleworth and Cowie's *Dictionary of translation studies* pragmatic translation is the kind of translation "which pays attention not only to denotative meaning but also to the way utterances are used in communicative situations and the way we interpret them in context." (Shuttleworth-Cowie, 2007. 128) Pragmatic translation will take into account connotative meaning, allusion, interpersonal aspects of communication such as implicature, tone, register. Among pragmatic translations we can cite: scientific treatises, government documents, instructions, descriptions, directions that appear on packaged goods.

Table 5.

SEMANTIC translation	COMMUNICATIVE/PRAGMATIC translation
Author-centred	Reader-centred
Related to thought	Related to speech
faithful	effective
More detailed but more awkward	Simpler, clearer

personal	social
SL-biased	TL-biased
Tendency to over-translate	Tendency to under-translate
Inferior to the original	Possibly better than the original
Eternal, decontextualized	Existential, context-dependent
Wide, universal	Tailor-made, targeted for a specific readership
True version	Felicitous version
Meaning centred	Message centred

(Sorea, 2007. 72)

As Gorea states “A faithful translation attempts to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the original text within the constraints of the TL grammatical structures. It transfers cultural words and preserves the degree of grammatical and lexical *abnormality* (deviation from SL norms) in the translation. It attempts to be completely faithful to the intentions and the text-realization of the SL writer. Semantic translation differs from faithful translation only in, as far as it must take more account of the aesthetic value, that is, the beautiful and natural sounds of the SL text, compromising on meaning where appropriate so that no assonance, word-play or repetition jars in the finished version. Communicative translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership.”<sup>1</sup>

Adriana Vizental defines pragmatic meaning focusing on “the way pragmatic factors link linguistic structure to linguistic usage, i.e. on the practical use the sender makes of his background knowledge, as mirrored in the linguistic performance of the competent communicator.” (Vizental, 2006. 44) Pragmatic factors govern all the linguistic and non-linguistic choices: of words, of grammatical constructions, of tone of voice, of both languages. Pragmatic errors do not always mean grammatical mistakes or semantic errors: for instance, an utterance like *He/She is cute* is semantically and grammatically correct, but pragmatically inappropriate when talking about one’s superior. Pragmatic choices are culturally determined, and they rely on rules of politeness that may be or even are different in different countries: it is enough if we think of the usage habits of first name or last name and title in different cultural environments. “Pragmatic meaning also refers to the fact that the competent communicator knows how to use the language appropriately, functionally and strategically, manipulating the language intentionally, so as to obtain real-world advantages or avoid negative consequences.” (Vizental, 2006. 46) An appropriate use of language refers to adapting the message to the social setting of the interaction, to knowing how to encode our social status relative to our partner. This pragmatic knowledge is grammaticalised in the language, as people know the vocabulary, grammar structures and style they have to apply when talking to old people or superiors. The place, time and activity type, the so-called *situational context* also influences interactions, as we are aware that there is time and place for cracking a joke, being formal, etc.

Language has five basic functions:

- A neutral *informational* function: people use the language to convey information;

<sup>1</sup> Lucia Gorea, *Lost in translation – Beyond words*

<http://www.cttic.org/ACTI/2012/Actes/Lucia%20Gorea.pdf>. 3–4.

- A *directive* function: people use the language to influence other people's behaviour and attitudes;
- A *phatic* function: people use the language to keep communication lines and social relationships open;
- An *expressive* function: people use the language to express feelings and attitudes;
- An *aesthetic* function: people use the language to produce beauty, to please the era and to be interesting. (Jakobson, 1980.81-85)

The most important language functions for pragmatics are the directive and the phatic functions that go hand in hand with social meaning. People use the language phatically and directly to assure an efficient functioning of society. The two most important pragmatic phenomena that carry pragmatic meaning are speech acts and indirectness. Speech acts carry more or different meaning than the semantic load of the words. Thus, we can speak about a lexical level of meaning, a contextual level of meaning and the force of the utterance. A great deal of the speaker's meaning is conveyed indirectly. Indirectness is an outstanding bearer of pragmatic meaning, and people prefer indirectness for a number of reasons (to be more interesting, more polite, etc). Because of the massive amount of indirectness, some indirect constructs have been conventionalized: for instance, *How do you do*. Translators have to be very careful with such constructs, as they do not intend to inquire about the interlocutor's well-being, but are rather a form of greeting.

In the 1970 and early 1980 Reiss and Vermeer came up with the so-called *skopos* theory of translation, which stressed the interactional, pragmatic aspects of translation arguing that the shape of target texts (TT) should be determined by the function or *skopos* that is intended to fulfill in the target context. Skopos theory is target-text oriented: "rather than presenting the translator with a fixed body of facts which he or she must pass on to the target audience, ST is seen as an information offer, which the translator must interpret by selecting those features which most closely correspond to the requirements of the target situation." (Shuttleworth-Cowie, 2007. 156) According to the skopos theory, the translation of a text should be done primarily taking into consideration the needs and purposes of the target context and audience: thus a scientific text can become fairly literal, the sayings of Buddha can be translated without the endless repetitive parts and American business letters can be rendered with extra politeness formulae, when the target public is a European one.

In 1992 Mona Baker published a book, *In other words*, in which she dealt with the pragmatic aspects of translation as well. In the final chapter of the book she approaches the issue of pragmatic equivalence in two points, coherence and implicature:

"Coherence is a very problematic and elusive notion because of the diversity of factors, linguistic and non-linguistic, which can affect it and the varying degrees of importance which a particular factor can assume in a given context. Even a single lexical item, if mistranslated, can affect the way a text coheres. A polysemous item in the source text will rarely have an equivalent with the same range of meanings in the target language. If the source text makes use of two or more meanings of an item and the translation fails, for whatever reason, to convey any of those meanings, whole layers of meaning will be lost, resulting in what Blum-Kulka (1986) refers to as a 'shift incoherence' .

... The fact that many of these factors are language- and culture-specific adds to the complexity of the problem. What most of the examples given in this chapter seem to suggest is that in order to maintain coherence translators often have to minimize discrepancies between the model of the world presented in the source text and that with which the target reader is likely to be familiar. The extent of intervention varies considerably and depends in

the final analysis on two main factors. The first is the translator's ability to assess the knowledge and expectations of the target reader- the more the target reader is assumed to know, the less likely that the translator will be inclined to intervene with lengthy explanations. Likewise, the more harmony is assumed to exist between the model of the world presented in the source text and the target culture's version of the world, the more inclined the translator will be to remain invisible, i.e. refrain from direct intervention. The second factor is the translator's own view of his/her role and of the whole question of where his/her loyalties ought to lie - whether they ought to lie with the source text or with the target reader.” (Baker, 1992. 253-254)

An utterance like *It's hot* will have different translations, depending on the pragmatic meaning attached to it by different contexts: *It's hot* (=it's too hot in this room) will be translated to Romanian as *Este (prea) cald*, *It's hot* (=this soup is too hot to be eaten) will be translated as *Este prea fierbinte*, and *It's hot* (= this is a really good and exciting story) will be something like *Este foarte tare*. A sentence like *The film is OK* will mean different things, depending on the implicated meaning linked to previous expectations regarding the quality of the film and tone of voice and intonation: therefore, the very same utterance can be translated into Romanian as *Filmul este bun* (with the implicated meaning the film is better than I expected) and *Filmul este buniceal* (meaning it is not bad but not very good either).

Rodica Superceanu quotes Jean Delisle who introduced the concept of *pragmatic texts*: “this kind of text cannot be adequately and appropriately translated unless the translator considers the situation in which the texts were produced and the situation for which they are translated. Since the translation approach has to be pragmatic, i.e. to consider language in practical use and not language for aesthetic purposes, he has called such texts pragmatic.” (Superceanu, 2009. 13) Pragmatic texts are texts that belong to professional genres, which convey information in textual forms expected by the audience at which they are aimed. Pragmatic texts in translation studies come from the following domains: business and finance (business correspondence, contracts and agreements, insurance policies, reports, press releases, advertising materials, magazine articles), international organizations (EU, NATO, UNESCO, FAO reports, minutes, laws, statutes, resolutions, articles, brochures, booklets), education, science and technology (specialized articles, books, abstracts), tourism (guidebooks, brochures, leaflets, posters, contracts, regulations), the mass media (articles, interviews, news stories, subtitling or voice-over of films, documentaries, etc, legal matters (certificates, ID papers, powers of attorney, letters of recommendation, medical records, transcripts of records).

Pragmatic texts are characterized by:

- Specific communicative purposes: informative, persuasive or phatic;
- Specific content, generally focusing on objective facts or attitudes;
- A specific textual structure and information organization that follow specific norms and conventions that are determined by the nature of the message/reader's expectations;
- Specific lexical units, i.e. specific terminologies, set expressions, syntactic structures (impersonal constructions);
- Specific stylistic features: clarity, precision, conciseness, simplicity.

“Pragmatic texts are utilitarian, i.e. serve practical and immediate communicative purposes. Their content is made up of aspects of objective reality and takes a textual form specific to the communicative conventions of a professional community. Translating such texts requires from the translator several kinds of knowledge: of the subject matter, of the communicative



situation for which they are used, of the conventions of communication and of the stylistic devices which best realize the communicators' purposes." (Superceanu, 2009. 15)

The language of medicine has two different layers: sub-medical vs. proper medical terminology, popular vs. erudite or, in other words, medical language for specialists and medical language for lay people. Thus, English has two terms for a concept: the erudite word (from a Greek or Latin root) and the vernacular one. For instance, the common English name for *rhinitis* is *runny nose*. Medical English displays synonymic series, some members of these series are highly technical or specialized terms, other are semi-technical and many other belong to the general vocabulary. The lay synonym of *hemorrhage* is *bleeding*, that of *myopia* is *shortsightedness*, or that of *pruritus* is *itching*. The fact that synonyms appear in pairs of terms belonging to the popular – erudite registers characterizes Hungarian as well. English-Hungarian synonymic doublets warn translators to handle them with care because the choice of one or another member of the synonymic series depends on the audience. From a pragmatic viewpoint, translators should not mix up highly technical terms with their semi-technical or popular synonyms, and *syphilis* for instance, should not be translated as *vérbaj* in pragmatic text such as medical articles, as this is the archaic name of *szifilisz* (*syphilis*).

The pragmatic approach to language and communication considers the meaning of words and utterances as context-dependent, with reference to the possible networks of actions and the potential effects these actions may generate. Meaning is denotation but also connotation, and meaning, in a pragmatic viewpoint, sometimes exceeds the limitations of reference, so it does not simply describe the world. Lack of reference does not mean lack of meaning (no one has ever met Batman, yet all the stories about him make sense). Part of the meaning is its intended social function. "To understand language involves understanding the culture as well as the social practices of the community of speakers in question. Meaning emerges, is clearly conveyed and disambiguated only in specific contexts of situation, which need to be defined as the site where social, cultural and psychological elements of communal life become inextricably interwoven." (Sorea, 2007. 26)

Politeness is one of the most problematic issues in translation, although it is generally agreed that negative politeness should be translated with negative politeness and positive politeness with positive politeness. However, due to the amount of indirectness in English politeness matters, translators may find it sometimes difficult to translate negative politeness structures like *Would you mind washing your hands?* or *Sorry to bother you, but could you close the door?* whereas positive politeness such as *We really should close the door* seems far easier to translate.

Idioms can pose many problems in translation; in their case, replacement or substitution with cultural and functional TL equivalent is recommended:

*e.g. Szájába rág valamit – spoon-feeds someone; Nagy port vert fel – made a scene; Elment Földvárra deszkát árulni – went to sell coal in Newcastle; Nem látja a fától az erdőt – cannot see the forest for the trees; Orránál fogva vezet valakit – leads someone by the nose; Lassan a testtel – take it easy; Előre iszik a medve bőrére – counts his chicken before they are hatched* (Szöllősy, 2007. 91).

In a book dedicated to the translation of non-fictional texts, Judy Szöllősy highlights the assertive nature of translation, hinting at the fact that when translating one works with meaning and sense first of all. Meaning has four aspects: sense, feeling, tone, and intention, which are all manifest *in and through the choice of words* (Szöllősy, 2007. 34). The practical advice she gives students is to discover, first and foremost, the sense behind the text, and then proceed to translating it. For instance, the Hungarian expression *Az anyád* and the English

expression *Your mother* are dictionary equivalents, but not always contextual equivalents (translating the Hungarian curse as *Your mother* will not sound as some outrageous swearing).

The *Tu* and *vous* pronouns, the so-called *magázás-tegezés* in Hungarian, may be interesting in translation. “*Magázás*, the form of address between individuals who are not on close terms or are not on an equal footing or in the same age-group (the French equivalent is the use of *vous*) but which is just a jot more confidential than the use of *Őn* – a highly respectful and courteous form of address between individuals unacquainted with each other – should cause no special problem in English translation, since the neutral pronoun *you* provides a fine substitute. However, if you need to indicate formality involved in the act of *magázás*, you can resort to the use of formal address, thus: *Mr. Jones, Mrs. Jones, Sir, Mr., President, Lieutenant*. Though come to think of it, the use of *maga* when cursing someone, as in *Maga hatökör!* which with its clash of the high and the low can be a source of humour... would surely lose something in the translation.” (Szöllősy 2007: 82–83)

Pragmatic translation takes into account connotative meaning, allusion, interpersonal aspects of communication such as implicatures. Pragmatic meaning focuses on the way pragmatic factors link linguistic structure to linguistic usage. Pragmatic choices are culturally determined and the pragmatic approach to language and communication considers the meaning of words and utterances as context-dependent. That is why at the interface of pragmatics and translation studies we will come across the issues of politeness, idiomatic expressions, cursing, joking, implicated meanings, deictic elements such as *Tu* and *vous* pronouns, the role of context and audience, etc.

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