

# **XVIII FIT World Congress Proceedings**

Actes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès mondial de la FIT

I



International Federation of Translators



Translators Association of China



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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## I

Compiled by Translators Association of China



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# Translation and Culture

## Bilingualism and Bi-culturalism — Two Equally Important Requirements a Translator Should Meet

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**Abstract:** If language is a nation's identity card, it implies that the language reflects its culture, tradition, history, and way of life. Translating from one language into another is a very complex process. To many outsiders, translation is merely the transfer of words, rather than meaning, from one language to another. However, the meaning can be properly converted from the source language into the target language only if the translator is familiar with the cultural peculiarities of both nations and with sociolinguistic conventions. Things which are acceptable in one language may be viewed as unacceptable, even insulting, in another. A funny thing in the source language may be anything but funny in the target language. For example, while an American asks for something cheap, a Croat will not dare to mention that word in his request.

The culture we are living in determines our outlook on life. The same concept may be viewed differently in different cultures. Therefore, if one wishes to learn a foreign language and to use it correctly (to speak, write, and translate from/into it), social norms and values must necessarily be observed.

**Key words:** cultural diversity; bilingualism; bi-culturalism; social norms; social values

### INTRODUCTION

Communication of any type-verbal, non-verbal or written-is something we can not avoid today, especially at a time when borders between many countries are being "removed". However, effective and professional communication in different areas of business and life not only implies our ability to translate a certain word, phrase, or even a sentence so that it sounds understandable. It should also relay accurate and precise information. And, it is translators, often called the ambassadors of their respective countries, that are expected to establish firm links between languages, cultures and nations. For translators are "the learned agents of cultural transmission who circulate information, knowledge and passions around the globe" (Deslile & Woodsworth, 1995).

To transmit information and knowledge correctly, the translator must, apart from his/her language skills, be familiar with the culture, social norms and values of both nations. In this

context, phrases are the first stumbling block for the translator, revealing the degree of his/her bi-culturalism. Phrases are often mixed with jargon, and “jargon reflects the spirit of a nation” (Kelleway, 2003). It’s not difficult to conclude that bi-culturalism is a largely needed skill of a translator as it is in many cases the key to the solution of some, apparently, linguistic problems.

The Congress theme “Translation and Cultural Diversity” is therefore the perfect choice for today’s world when international business is growing, and when translators are increasingly needed. Although English is considered to be a world language or *lingua franca*, other languages are also widely used, which suggests that in addition to bilingualism, biculturalism is an equally important element in the whole process. We note a number of examples where the lack of the latter, even in today’s era of computerisation, causes serious problems, even offences. The following examples support this thesis, warning us at the same time of the danger that the famous English poet, Alexander Pope, pointed out in his “Essay on Criticism”, and which many writers, translators, and journalists have cited: “A little learning is a dangerous thing”. (Pope, 1711)

## 1. TRANSLATION VS. CULTURE

The following two examples, taken from a student textbook (aimed at students of international trade and marketing) clearly illustrate the difficulties caused by the translation revealing a lack of the knowledge of the target language culture:

“A British firm produced 15,000 leaflets in Spanish to send to Brazil”.

“A British advertising agency prepared a ‘before-and-after’ type advertisement to sell washing powder in the Arab world. The ‘before’ picture with the dirty clothes was on the left; the ‘after’ picture with the clean clothes was on the right”. (Naunton, 2005)

Equally interesting was a heading that appeared on the internet at Christams: “A kiss under the mistletoe”, referring also to Christmas gifts to be found there. Translation of this text into Croatian requires adaptation, i.e. the key word — the mistletoe — can by no means be translated literally. The tree should, however, be replaced with “the pine tree” or “the conifer tree” as these are the Christmas trees in Croatia.

An advertisement in a British newspaper reads: “The dress to get you noticed after 6 pm”. This does not mean anything to a Croatian reader, for if the designer wants to sell this dress in Croatia, the translator must know that one is get noticed after 8 pm, in summer even after 9 or 10 pm. So, the most effective translation into Croatian would be: “The evening dress to get you noticed”. In Croatia, not only does the time of evening outings differ from that in some Western European countries or the United States, but the hours are not usually mentioned, particularly in the coastal part of the country with its prevailing Mediterranean lifestyle.

The last two examples, unlike the first two, will not cause an offence. They will simply not convey the exact information to the reader, or will create a vague picture of the Croatian lifestyle, whereas the first two examples will not only incur enormous costs to the firms in-

volved, but may be directly offensive. For both the translator and the company's management must be fully aware that Portuguese rather than Spanish is spoken in Brazil and that Arabs read from right to left.

## 2. DEGREES OF DIRECTNESS

### 2.1 Verbal Communication

Language is very often a reflection of social and cultural norms, and various misunderstandings are likely to happen when two cultures come into close contact. In different languages, particularly in written communication misunderstandings are a frequent phenomenon, but in the former the feed-back is quick which can help us understand immediately that we have not conformed to interlocutor's social or cultural norms, although the linguistic rules may have been perfectly observed. And while one language allows for more directness in one segment, the other language does so in another segment.

#### 2.1.1 Cultural differences-requests; introduction

In Croatian, for example, a higher degree of directness is allowed in expressing a request where the use of an imperative softened by the addition of *please* is common. In English, on the other hand, a less direct way with modals is preferred. If a Croatian request is translated directly into English, a British or American speaker will probably think that Croats are rude people.

Similarly, a Croatian speaker may think that British people or Americans are rude when introducing one another. The latter are most likely, after you have been introduced to them by your full name, or the first name alone, to address you by your first name, irrespective of the age, gender and status. In Croatian, this is totally unacceptable particularly if an elder person is concerned, if the difference in the status is obvious, or if the relationship between the interlocutors is not clear. Social parameters of communication show Croats to be rather formal and polite people in such situations, which fact often leads to the misuse of some phrases in communication not only with English speakers but, interestingly enough, with Croatian speakers, too. Therefore, while one party will be considered rude in one situation, the other will receive the same treatment in another. Familiarity with basic social and cultural norms, in addition to knowledge of the language, of course, will help us overcome such differences.

#### 2.1.2 Yes-no hungry

The way food is offered and accepted in Croatia differs considerably from the procedure in Britain/America. In an effort to show their politeness and generosity, Croats will offer food several times irrespective of the guest's first refusal. Accordingly, they will expect to be offered food several times after they have refused it the first time.

However, what is the main cultural difference we are confronted with in accepting or refusing food in Croatian and in English? Here, Croatian "Thank you!" and English "Thank you!" may have an opposite meaning. When you say "Thank you!" in Croatian, it may mean that you are accepting the food or drink offered, it may also mean that you are refusing

it. Adversely, English “No, thank you!” conveys the clear message that the food or drink is being refused. Accordingly, “Yes, please” means that the food offered is accepted. The message is therefore quite obvious: you must clearly and directly express your desire unless you wish to go hungry or thirsty in Britain or America. It may be rather difficult for the translator to relate the clear message from Croatian into English, or some other foreign language, without a broader context, or unless the body language suggests whether “Thank you!” means “yes” or “no”.

A huge cultural confusion is further created when prices are at stake. In addition to correct publishing of prices (figures, especially when decimals numbers are involved), one must be careful to enquire about the price. A Croatian customer is unlikely to ask for something cheap. If something is considered to be expensive, the buyer will try to find an excuse for not buying it. Therefore, the translator might have difficulties translating into English the Croatian exclamations “Hm!” or “Ah!” expressing the buyer’s disapproval of the price. The English phrase “It’s more than I was going to pay” does not sound as direct, but conveys a clear message.

### 3. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Business Correspondence is one of the segments where social and cultural norms are as important as linguistic ones. The choice of vocabulary and the level of formality differ from country to country, i.e. from one language to another. Different people use different types of English, depending on their needs, but the result must be always the same—the message transmitted must be clear.

In written communication, where each written word or phrase can be analysed many times, and where an inadequate choice of register may lead to misunderstanding or even offence, cultural and social norms must be studied carefully.

Business correspondence is one of the segments of written communication requiring a special attention. As stated in the introduction, international business is continuously growing, reflecting the need for communication among business people. Although business letters are the form of written communication of which the importance seems to be declining, they are still widely used, which calls for due consideration.

#### 3.1 Business Letters — Salutation

Salutations, although very short, causes many problems. The political system which prevailed in my country for half a century did not allow for a rich selection of terms in this regard. So, I can speak about two social norms within my country alone. Political changes, however, led to certain changes in cultural and social norms, thus bringing us closer to Western-European heritage, where we naturally belong to. The new linguistic norms arose as a reflection of the said changes. Yet, it is difficult to change the habits of some people, which may cause various difficulties in communication at an international level.

Needless to say, flaws occur both in written Croatian and in translations into other foreign languages. This lack of awareness is still noticeable among many people, and it is the translators' task to eliminate such problems.

This chapter focuses on business letters alone and the forms of salutations used in this type of letter.

The first problem arising out of the unfamiliarity with both source and target language appears in the translation of salutation. The Croatian choice of the expressions used to address the recipient of a letter seems to be richer than the English choice, implying that mistakes are more likely to occur in Croatian than in English. For the English word "dear", which is a common salutation in English letters, the Croatian equivalent will hardly ever be "dear" (the same "dear" as in "My dear friend" or "Dear Marija"). There are many factors influencing the salutation, and Croatian salutations tend to be rather formal. The degree of formality often leads to various mistakes in Croatian, which are subsequently turned into English. If a person whose mother tongue is not English, and the same person is not familiar with English social and cultural norms, the possibility of making a mistake in the salutation is very great indeed.

Furthermore, English linguistic norms do not allow the first name to be used in salutations after "Mr", "Mrs" or "Ms". Such "creations" are however possible, although linguistically not approved, in Croatian, and stem from a very high degree of formality, or politeness.

### 3.2 Signature

One of the main difficulties a translator is faced with when translating forms of address from English into Croatian pertains to the English abbreviation "Ms", the equivalent of which does not exist in Croatian. Accordingly, when addressing a female person in Croatian whose marital status you do not know, you are likely to hear certain objections. Therefore, "Ms" in most cases will not be translated into Croatian.

The question is how to translate "Ms Jordan" adequately into Croatian if the marital status of the person in question is unknown. The most usual translation would be the equivalent of "Mrs Jordan", rarely "Miss", in either case at the risk of offending the said person.

However, it is not the custom in the Croatian written language to indicate a woman's marital status, as is done in English. Whereas "Mrs Jenny Brown" or "Jenny Brown (Mrs)" is the usual form in English business letters, such an indication of the maritas status is impossible in Croatian, meaning that "Mrs", either preceding or following the signatory's name, will never be translated into Croatian.

The signature is often the cause of many mistakes. The signatory's position is not always correctly translated, due to the fact that many positions still sound incomprehensible or are non-translatable in Croatian. Once again, we come to the point that this is the result of the strong influence of the former political system or, in other words, this is a sociolinguistic issue.

Another clear difference in signature which should be pointed out pertains to the left and the right side. Namely, the Croatian rules of correspondence state that the more important person is signed on the right-hand side, whereas such a signatory in an English letter signs on the



left. When translating business letters, the side on which the signatories' names appear, even if their positions are not indicated, should suggest their position in the company.

## CONCLUSION

Examples of cultural diversities affecting translation abound and it is no use to mention them, let alone to elaborate on them.

The aim of this paper is, however, to contribute to better understanding differences between languages, resulting from the cultural diversity of their speakers. The article analyses the differences between Croatian, a small European language spoken by four million and half people, and English, a world language. Yet, although the world is said to be a global village, and English is a *lingua franca*, linguistic, cultural and social diversities still exist and should be observed. In multicultural countries such diversities are more obvious, people are more aware of them and some of the above mentioned mistakes are less likely to occur.

The following excerpt from a students' textbook may be an excellent contribution to the understanding of cultural diversities: "Cultural challenges exist side by side with the problems of doing business in a foreign language. But the more you know of the culture of the country you are dealing with, the less likely you are to get into difficulties" (Jones & Alexander, 2000), warning us once again of the misconception that the knowledge of a language alone is a sufficient skill to communicate effectively with a foreigner.

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