

TRANSLATING THE MUSEUM: TRANSLATING CULTURE, TRANSLATING DIFFERENCE

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Obviously or not, objects are not displayed in a museum nor are they part of a museum collection because they are ordinary. On the contrary, if not for their uniqueness or rarity, items are collected, stored, restored, preserved, exhibited and interpreted at least for their representativeness. Most often, exhibits illustrate an epoch, a culture, a topic which is characterized by a variable degree of differentiation compared to the world we live in. An ethnographic museum for instance focuses on the traditions, beliefs, occupations, lifestyle of the population of a very well individualized region, all of these striking the contemporary, mostly urban museum visitors by the vision of the universe, inter alia. A history museum would focus on one or several historical ages, which obviously are more or less faraway from ours and consequently more or less strange to us. The mission of a technical museum is to point out the technical achievements of humanity, according to different criteria, varying from the field to which they belong, to the age they are characterizing, importance etc. In its turn, an art museum displays, as its name indicates, art works, whose connections to reality are most of the time rather loose if any at all. And the list may continue. Of course, a natural history museum, could one say, does nothing but surprise life as it is, but, let's reckon it, it is not our life which it most of the time displays but the life of different kingdoms. And when it does display our life, it usually does so in a manner that is overwhelming to say the least. Let us consider only two examples: the travelling exhibition "The Human Body" on show at "Grigore Antipa" Natural History Museum in 2013, famous for the tridimensional dissections presenting the less known aspects of the human body functioning, or the spectacular exhibition "Les Mouches" at the History Museum of Neuchâtel in 2005, treating such an apparently boring topic as the one of the flies in a holistic perspective, including their presence in the arts and in medicine and much more.

Our point is that a museum exhibit, temporary or permanent, thematic or creative, develops on a difference and that for being understood such a difference requires translation and interpretation, not necessarily from one language into another but from a system of knowledge into another. It is on this cultural otherness that we focus in the present paper, in the attempt of pointing out the different factors involved in the transmission of meaning.

We use the term translation thinking mainly of its Latin etymon, *translatius*: carried across, moved from one place to another, transferred, and also of the designation of an iconographic scene, *the translation of a saint's relics* and of its ceremonial implications. Symbol of the otherness, of the holy one, the relics seem to concretize the materiality of words, otherwise ephemeral.

The long debated concept of cultural translation has been used in various contexts for several decades by now, being associated either with anthropology/ ethnography or with cultural/postcolonial studies. If in the former case it is culture which is transferred, in the latter case the displacement mainly refers to people carrying with them their culture, their spirituality, their ideologies.¹ Peeter Torop points out the inseparable relation between culture and translation, a culture's "translational capacity" being part of its specificity. It is "through translational activity" that culture introduces constantly new information in our system of values. In the globalization era that has been driving our lives for several decades by now, the concept of "identity through culture" generalized and "the comprehension of the utmost necessity of cultural identity for the perception of political, social, economic and technological development"² came to be known under the name of "cultural turn"³. According to Segers, who predicts that "globalization will be nationalized to a great extent", the concept of "cultural identity" is the only one allowing the "understanding of the complex paradox of globalization versus nationalization"⁴.

In this context, the translator's awareness of the topic is crucial in sending over the right message. His/her hermeneutical input is inevitable as any human translator operates based on previously acquired knowledge which serves as a background information pool, out of which he/she extracts the terms he/she considers most adequate, makes choices regarding syntax, the stylistic register etc. Last but not least, the translator has to consider the coherence of the whole, how a particular sentence makes sense in relation to what precedes it or what follows it, both from a narrow and from a wide angle, both the cotext and the context. As Radegundis Stolze points out, the ultimate purpose is the intelligibility of the message in the target language:

"As a final step, (...) one will think of the addressees' expectation and of the law of intelligibility. A text for lay people poses other challenges than one for experts, even if the translator himself is no expert in that field"⁵

Thus, in a museum environment translation is manifold and operates simultaneously on different plans. In most cases when creating an exhibition one deals with the translation of material culture⁶, which has to be understood both in its original, physical meaning of displacement and in the contemporary one of linguistic transposition. First of all, the very deed of preserving in a museum collection a number of items involves an extraction, of the original context and the transfer to the museum storage rooms and/or restoration

¹ Kyle Conway, *Cultural Translation*, in *Handbook of Translation Studies* vol. 3, ed. Yves Gambier & Luc van Doorslaer, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2012, pp. 21–25

² Peeter Torop, *Translation as translating as culture* in *Sign Systems Studies*, 30.2, 2002, University of Tartu, Tartu, pp. 593-594

³ Rien T Segers, *The Inevitable Strength of Cultural Identity at the Beginning of the Twenty First Century Between Localizing and Globalizing Tendencies*, in *Identité culturelle. Littérature, Histoire, Mémoire*, coordinated by Ourania Polycandrioti, Institute of Neo-Hellenic Researches, National Foundation of Scientific Research, Athens, 2006, p. 54

⁴ *Ibidem*, 50

⁵ Radegundis Stolze, *Dealing with cultural elements in technical texts for translation*, in *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, Issue 11 - January 2009, Roehampton University, London, p. 139

⁶ Kate James, *Cultural Implications for Translation*, in *Translation Journal*, volume 6, No. 4, October 2002, available online at <http://accurapid.com/journal/22delight.htm>

laboratories. Thereafter, when it comes to building up an exhibition, the most representative items for the chosen topic or field are selected to be included in the display, which involves another translation, inside the museum space, from one room to another. Finally, the linguistic translation/ interpretation is the one which shall point out the items and be responsible for their adequate perception by the public. Therefore, the message has to be expressed taking into consideration the audience, the cultural awareness, expectations and intellectual preparedness hereof, as otherwise meaning shall remain uncomprehended, even if it is expressed in one's native language. Thus, an ethnographic exhibit designated through a regionalism such as *budălău cu brighidău* requires necessarily an explanation into contemporary Romanian language and only afterwards can it be translated into another language. Even if corresponding words exist in the target language and access to such information is available to the translator, such equivalence will not reach any receptor among the museum visitors, most of whom are not native speakers of one of the international languages, but rather intermediary level speakers hereof, although very accurate knowers or native speakers visit the museums as well.

Translation, in a museum context, is tightly connected to another concept, transnation, the latter forming the channel through which the message is being rendered, and also the destination of such message. This process is about the transmission of a cultural and intellectual identity and the perception hereof by members of a different cultural entity. According to Emily Apter, the one who associated these two notions when considering the wider field of translation studies, the prefix trans- acts both as a "connecting port" and as a "cultural caesura"⁷. From our perspective, the museum text should be able to transpose, to reflect, through the displayed collections, the cultural identity of a people into the eyes and minds of both foreigners and co-nationals. A museum exhibit and the auxiliary textual and audio-visual information should be non-discriminatory, meaning that it should be equally comprehensible by an Asian visitor or a European one. Ideally, it should make information available also to the audio-visually disabled. The Israeli Children's Museum of Holon proposes visitors tours guided by disabled persons.⁸ Similar programs and facilities are also implemented at the Whitney Museum of American Art⁹, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Museum of Modern Art as identified by a specialized survey¹⁰. Another example is the one of the Roman Agora of Thessaloniki, which integrates facilities for the blind.

Irrespective of the degree of straightforwardness of the message, the receptors hereof always decode it according to several elements, one of which is the cultural luggage each and every one of us bears. Therefore, when presenting the material culture of a (pre-)historical population, we must make sure the visitor understands whom we are speaking of, we should provide clear names and forget about the syntagms so repeatedly found in the specialized literature. In a technical exhibition, it is likewise advisable to be as precise as possible, without providing from start too many details and thus becoming boring, and

⁷ Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006, p. 5

⁸ <http://www.holon.muni.il/English/Culture/Pages/ChildrenMuseum.aspx>

⁹ <http://whitney.org/Education/Access>

¹⁰ <http://www.artagogo.com/commentary/artforblind/artforblind.htm>

without unnecessary embellishments of technical information which simply needs to be accurate in the source language so to allow an intelligible discourse into the target language. Answers to very simple questions, like Who? When? Where? What? or How?, are of outmost importance in the process of translating the message into the target language and the one of interpretation of such message by the recipients.

There is also the linguistically untranslatable immaterial heritage, which is sometimes incorporated in the museum environment, and is represented by oral traditions or testimonies, by what can be referred to as “gestures and habits”¹¹. One can though speak of translation in this case, in the Latin meaning, of transferring, of carrying from one point to another, considering the modern methods, supports and formats of storing such evidence (CDs, DVDs, .mp3, .mp4, .avi etc.) and which can be and have generally been integrated in displays, such practices becoming a common feature of the exhibition lately. We refer here to the various kinds of recordings, made in remote sites, most of the time not or less corrupted by modern technology, and which by their incorporation in the museum display assure such a translation of the authentic traditions into the contemporary universe.

The structure of the museum message should be layered as it needs to provide information to visitors who have different cognitive degrees of a certain subject matter and are motivated by various intentions when entering the museum space. The level of specialized information one expects to find in an exhibition is of outmost importance when considering the visitor’s final degree of satisfaction with the museum experience. We should therefore be able to identify the visitors’ needs and – preferably using sensors integrated in the display furniture and computer-aided interpretation of the time one spends in front of an exhibit¹² – we should add up layers of new information until one stop being interested by that item. A less technical way of doing practically the same is to give the visitor the possibility of pushing a digit on the audioguide or a button on a knowledge console in the exhibit area, in order to satisfy one’s curiosity.

In 1971 already, Roman Jakobson differentiated three types of translation, all of which find their application in the museum context:

- 1) *Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.*
- 2) *Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.*
- 3) *Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems*¹³

To conclude, we should stress the fact that translation – be it linguistic, conceptual or material, physical - means cultural transfer. Nowadays we cannot imagine what our cognitive paradigm would be without the Bible, the works of Aristotle, the haikus, the theories and finds of Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein. All of these would not have reached

¹¹ Kate James, *loc.cit.*

¹² Flavia Sparacino, *Natural Interaction in Intelligent Spaces: Designing for Architecture and Entertainment*, pp. 3-4, 17-18, available online at http://alumni.media.mit.edu/~flavia/Papers/MTAP_Sparacino_o6_draft.pdf

¹³ Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings. Word and Language*, « On linguistic aspects of translation », Mouton, The Hague, p. 261

us without a translation process. Leaving apart incongruities and caesuras which sometimes happen in translating various types of information, translation plays an essential role in the spreading of knowledge. Borrowing the words of Wolfgang Schmale, we should stress that “there is no culture that is not intercultural or *métissage*”¹⁴, which means that the very fact of adapting the museum message to the visitor’s needs and expectations is indicative of the awareness of such interference of the target language into the source language with the purpose of better conveying the intended meaning.

In its turn, the museum lists among its missions to educate, train and raise awareness on topics related to its collections, and to do so the translational activity is paramount, not only for reaching the foreign public but also in addressing the national visitors, who require the adaptation of the information to their cognitive needs and habits. Therefore, the collaboration of the museum specialist, who knows every single detail of the museum collections, and the museum translator/ interpreter, is a must in the contemporary world in order to achieve the cultural product named exhibition.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Schmale, *Cultural Transfer*, in *European History Online (EGO)*, the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz, 2012, URL: <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/schmalew-2012-en> URN: <urn:nbn:de:0159-2012120501>, paragraph 10