

DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE: AN APPROACH TO SPECIALISED REGISTERS

Carmen ARDELEAN¹

Abstract

Due to the specificity of their activity at the crossroads of cultures, translators have become today important pillars of “cultural communication” (Malone, 1998), as well as of the “soft power” described by Nye (1990; 2004). Ever more often the place of conflicts is taken by debates and negotiations in which translators hold an important role. However, state propaganda sometimes makes it more difficult to distinguish truth from lie, in written documents as well as in the official political discourse. Translator trainees should be prepared for this role and be offered the opportunity to study such texts, in order to learn how to act as real cultural mediators. The question is: should they go beyond the surface meaning of words, in search of a hidden truth, or should they remain “invisible” and provide the linguistic transfer without any personal involvement?

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, political discourse, translation, soft power

1. The portrait of a translator from A to Z

Language is the epitome of culture. Some say it reflects the way we think – see, for example, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – and that the “language habits” of a given community determine “certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir, 1958: 66); others, among whom Hofstede (1982), Fausey (2010), Boroditsky (2011) - say it actually influences the programming of minds. Learning constantly upgrades it; but the way in which we use it in multicultural environments depends on a wide range of social, psychological, hierarchical and educational factors interwoven in a complex relationship which eludes standardization or classification.

The world in which we live today requires multicultural awareness and proposes pluri-linguistic exposure to information, and globalization is responsible, to a great deal, for this reality. But the way in which we process data, the way in which we react to information and respond to it largely depends on our specific cultural training. At the same time, understanding the subliminal meanings in different

¹ Carmen Ardelean, Department of Foreign Languages and Communication, The Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, karenar65@gmail.com

languages and different topics of interest is difficult, especially due to the diversity of linguistic, structural, cognitive or pragmatic details involved therein.

Having started, in the old days, as “invisible” participants in the distribution of knowledge, translators gradually gained importance and visibility. The way in which information – both written and spoken – is approached has also changed significantly, and modern translation theorists have pointed out new ways of approaching texts in translation. Forget about word-for-word or literal translation, as was so common in biblical translations; now one must focus on context and sub-text – that is, on “what is implied, but not said” (Newmark, 1988: 77). Translators are now invited to be more *involved* in the source text and commonly use methods such as adaptation, idiomatic or even communicative translation, as defined by Newmark.

But, as diverse as languages may be in their cultural context, so are translators themselves. Some consider that personal creativity and an individual literary disposition are enough for maintaining high standards in translation; others are of the opinion that, before practice, translation theory should be mastered to perfection. Some focus on the finished product from the point of view of personal pride and satisfaction; others focus on the ultimate purpose of any translation, which the readers’ satisfaction – and that, by all means, is translating diplomacy in its essence, albeit lacking recognition as such.

Whatever the case, translators today should accept that there is an increasing need for *emotional involvement* in any task at hand, irrespective of the topic under focus. Individual personality traits are present, whether we are aware of it or not, in any task we perform – and so are cultural clichés we live by. And this is the area which mostly needs careful attention, throughout the translation process. After all, as Claire Kramsch (2009: 15) puts it, each language “creates” its own “socially shared realities or cultures” whereby, besides becoming an informative tool, it becomes “a symbolic system with the power to create and shape symbolic realities”; these are, in fact, the actual elements of language in a cultural context that translators are faced with, and are bound to solve to perfection.

As outspoken members of a specific culture, translators carry with them the heavy weight of shared community experience and, in most cases, it influences the way in which they make the final choice of basic terminology, context, deep meaning and representability for potential readers. Translation *is* human communication to different audiences, with various expectations that rarely coincide. Therefore, sharing information in a way that combines faithfulness to the source and acceptability to the prospective audience is the hardest task of all.

2. Translation is linguistic diplomacy – or is it?

For the present study, the author has purposely left aside any reference to literary or specialised translation, although they both tend to include a number of references which may need some sort of “diplomatic” approach by translators. The translation of Romanian literature post-1989 is a good example of the way in which literary means are used to convey opinions, attitudes and cultural clichés which need careful translation tactics and skills in order to be rendered correctly.

But, in the author’s opinion, diplomacy in translation is best explained by using political discourse as a pretext. International politics is the place where ideas and cultures meet and sometimes clash, where cultural stereotypes are more obvious but, nevertheless, more difficult to render, either accurately or palatably, in different languages and for wider audiences.

As representatives of specific cultures and, at the same time, of specific political ideologies, politicians are, more than anyone else, those who “express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share” (Kramsch, 2009: 12). There is, however, a thin line separating pure information from propaganda, in any political discourse. Political discourse is also a means of asserting power and, as such, an important factor of “soft” influence.

The concept of “soft” power is not a new one; Joseph S. Nye first proposed it in 1990, with reference to ways of imposing American ideas, opinions and cultural elements, supposedly different from aggressive “hard” means. In time, this concept became more and more relevant, both in international relations and in other areas of human life, and is now perceived as an important part of Cultural Diplomacy.

Being a freelance translator, an author as well as a translator-trainer and, at the same time, with the benefit of thorough training in the field of political studies, the author of this study came to the conclusion that, apart from their contribution to spreading information and acting as “cultural mediators” in general terms, translators should also be perceived as “essential, albeit underestimated diplomats of our time” (Ardelean, 2016: 71). In international environments, treaties and agreements rely on good translation, while interpreters are critical for the results of any negotiations. At the same time, these highly sensitive activities require good training in order to distinguish between truth and lie, between national pride and propaganda.

Several decades ago, translating in diplomatic environments could prove to be a risky profession. Many translators in Romania heard the story of the first president’s official translator and interpreter who, in some occasions, adapted the inappropriate words of his employer both in speeches and in writing, so as to

comply to diplomatic rules. Informed of this situation, the president reacted violently and finally sacked the translator. Nevertheless, the translator's decisions ultimately contributed to creating a more tolerant approach to the Romanian policy at the time. This story became a kind of urban myth for generations of translators, about the *dos* and *don'ts* of the profession in diplomatic and political environments.

On the other hand, mistranslated culturally-biased expressions risk to confuse the target audiences, and examples abound; "lame duck", with reference to President Obama's imminent end-of-term in office, or the famous "shoulder to shoulder" uttered by President Bush during his visit to Romania are just two instances in which bad translation was propagated by the media.

Today, the cultural-diplomatic "assault" is common among many states, through their representatives in international institutions and organisations. From the translators' perspective, this makes their task even more difficult, because it means a lot more than the simple search for equivalent linguistic terms and adapting the text to appropriate target language semantics. It involves separating different layers of meaning and, at the same time, deciding upon "the truths to be said" – or not.

One of the roles that translators must play on the international stage is to ensure quality communication across different cultures. But, in the political discourse, communication is often influenced by ideologies and manipulated through media channels, thus determining a substantial change of structure which may be difficult to render in translation. As Chris Weedon states: "*Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation in language and language is not an abstract system but is always socially and historically located in discourses. Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power.*" (Weedon, 1987: 361), which means that it is exactly this new meaning which must be sought for and rendered correctly in translation.

Today we live in a world of cooperation, in which the political discourse becomes a communicative construct that must comply with the rules of multicultural, cross-border communication in order to be convincing. But this does not result in the establishment of easily recognizable common cultural stereotypes, patterns or values that would be just as easily rendered in translation. It is impossible to standardize cultures and, as a result, native cultural patterns will continue to instinctively dominate the final result of the linguistic transfer.

One of the difficulties in translating the contemporary political discourse lies in its status as a symbolic soft-power identity. Its intertextual coherence is based on more than just linguistic patterns and plays-upon-words; it also includes subliminal ideas with a positive or negative connotation, that the translator must immediately recognize and replicate in any given language.

It is even more difficult to recognize and apply, in the translation of the political discourse, the communicative role of *politeness structures*, in the understanding given by Brown & Levinson (1987). In a nutshell, the authors refer to examples of *positive politeness* – if the main purpose of the discourse is to please audiences and to gain approval – and *negative politeness*, viewed as some kind of instinctive, partly aggressive protection of the text-deliverer against any negative reaction to one's actions or ideas.

These are just a few of the features of the political discourse that may have an influence on the translation of such texts. In this case, mistranslation is only one of the problems, as a possible result of an inappropriate understanding of the sequential layers of meaning as intentionally used by text authors. Different readers may perceive different meanings but, unlike the reading of a literary text, the ultimate effect could be the manipulation of masses, with the help of seemingly inoffensive linguistic means.

Translators, therefore, have a major responsibility when translating political discourse, and issues of ethics and communicative adequacy are at play, besides the correct rendering of individual words, or of words in a specific context.

3. Case study: a comparative approach to political discourse in translation

The present paper is conceived as partly theoretical, partly a reflection of the author's opinions on the topic and partly dedicated to the practice of translation. The case study included herein is part of a larger project developed for a translator training program, in which students are assessing the specific features of authentic discourse (speeches made by international personalities, as published by international media) from various domains: economic & financial, political, social, educational and so on. Students are also invited to make their own choices of texts, once the topic for the following discussion is set.

The participants in this project are translator trainees in the second and third year of studies, therefore young people who already have a thorough theoretical basis in the field of Translation Theory as well as the appropriate writing skills needed for the task.

The writing task is preceded by several open discussions, meant to point out the specific characteristics of political rhetoric, potential multi-layer meanings and difficulties of rendering both in Romanian, due to vocabulary limitations and perceived cultural differences.

Each debate is held on *two different levels*: one is the *linguistic level* – during the debates, students are invited to discover the specific elements of each text excerpt

(syntax, semantics, register, structural, cognitive and pragmatic context, etc.), along with the cultural specificity of the text.

The second part of the debate refers to *potential means of translating* the text at hand, using various methods and procedures. Post-factum discussions then point out the difficulties in finding the appropriate translation variants, and the reasons for those difficulties.

These debates also have a second purpose, in agreement with one of the critical issues related to translation. Translator trainees are taught to look at each text objectively, irrespective of their personal opinions regarding the topic or deliverers of the discourse.

This is an important lesson that translators need to learn from the earliest stages of their training, taking into account the fact that, during their future careers, they are bound to come across complex texts which may not comply with their opinions or beliefs. Whatever the text at hand, translators must remain “invisible” (in Venuti’s understanding of the term) while serving the purpose of delivering a translation which correctly renders the intended meaning of the original and without interference or misuse of terms in the target language.

Special attention is also paid to raising the trainees’ awareness regarding the specific characteristics of the political discourse and its general purpose. As a rule, political speakers aim to inform and persuade, and various stylistic elements are used in order to achieve these aims. At the same time, such presentations are by no means flat or filled with lengthy, boring statistical details; they are often accompanied by factual, real-life examples meant to reduce the virtual distance between the speaker and his or her audiences and to stir emotions in the listeners or the readers.

For a long time, in fact, right from the emergence of the American Constitution, the State of the Union address has been a constant presence in the life of the American people. In the founding document, presidents were encouraged to address the Congress “from time to time”, in order to inform Congress members about current issues and presidential decisions. Article II, Section 3, Clause 1 of the American Constitution also requires the President to “recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.”

It became an annual duty of the presidents starting with Woodrow Wilson’s address of 1913 and has been known under the present title since president Harry S. Truman’s discourse in 1947. No longer open for debate only within the Congress closed doors, the State of the Union Address is also important for the general public and the media, all of whom can then assess and discuss sensitive issues in each case.

The extent of topics included in such texts, as well as the presence of specialised terminology related to different sections therein make them useful for vocabulary learning and translation purposes.

The two political discourse texts chosen as an example for the present study were delivered by two different top politicians in the US: President Obama (with his 2016 State of the Union address) and President Trump's first Presidential Speech to the nation, dated February 28, 2017. The choice is based on the fact that the target audience (mainly, the American audiences, but also readers interested in international relations and politics, from all over the world) is the same in both cases, and so is the variant of English used (American English); the purpose of this choice was to avoid a supplementary source of stress for the students, resulting from having to assess two different sets of culturally-biased English usage patterns.

The choice was also based on the existing opposite opinions regarding the two personalities, as a result of media exposure and political bias, both in America and in Europe. Alternative choices could include the State of the European Union Addresses delivered in 2017 and 2018 respectively, or any presentations made for the general public by different political leaders from various countries. Some of the common characteristics of these speeches include the focus on the *main areas of public interest* – social issues, economic development, gender issues, culture and international relations – as well as the typical formal register and *specific sentence structure features* used in the political discourse.

4. Methodology and results

The students were divided into groups of four, and each group received a part of the discourse (2 pages). They were then asked to *read the text for gist* and to point out *key words and structures*, which could later help them in view of a better understanding of the text difficulties.

In the *linguistic assessment phase* of the project, each group had to decide upon several elements considered important for the final translation, such as the register used, the structural/cognitive/pragmatic context, the cohesive elements present in each case, as well as various elements of style (such as metaphors, euphemisms, recourse to public memory and so on), all of which ensured the uniqueness of approach from each speaker.

4.1. Truth vs lies in the political rhetoric

An important part in the trainees' approach to the test was the need to separate pure, dependable information from elements of propaganda or distorted truth. Obviously, any politician – and especially those who are at the top of the

hierarchical structure of a country's administration – will emphasize and praise personal achievements and minimize potential inabilities, mistakes or failure to comply with public expectations.

State of the Union addresses do include specific reference to such issues, but they are usually placed in a carefully chosen context, aimed at reducing the negative impact they may have on the audiences. For instance, President Obama refers to the most tragical moment in the recent history of the USA – the 9/11 terrorist attacks – by pointing out that, *in the following fifteen years*, the American economy underwent an unprecedented growth.

In turn, President Trump's speech, following a controversial election marked by the dissent and protests of the racial minorities, starts with a reference to the (presumably intentional) choice of the moment for his discourse at the “conclusion of our celebration of Black History Month”, thereby posing as a supporter of this minority group's rights.

Other examples include President Obama's metaphorical reference to the freedom “from the grip of foreign oil”, presenting it as a relevant result of his policies, or President Trump's (presumably personal) support for the defense of “the borders of other nations”, at a time when the general public opinion was adamant regarding America's excessive military involvement in faraway geographical areas.

Students found this part of the text assessment quite challenging, as well as largely useful from an informative point of view. They had the opportunity to learn more details about American politics and political decisions. At the same time, the challenge also came from their previous personal opinions regarding American life, politics and leaders, as these texts shed a light on the presidents' direct involvement in each area of life of their citizens. Following a better understanding of what “truth versus lies” actually means in the political rhetoric – far from the everyday differences of these terms in real life – they managed to point out many text fragments in which this carefully chosen balance between the two terms is observed by the two speakers taken into consideration.

Special attention was paid to the recognition of *specific cultural elements* – which are usually the most difficult to translate. Politicians often include such references in their speeches, because they are easily recognisable by the target audiences – but they are less common to readers from different cultures. Such references may include geographical areas, names of well-known local personalities, local events or tragedies, reference to national heroes, entertainment, local food or customs.

The texts chosen for this project were, indeed, full of such references, and translation trainees were informed that it was important to understand them properly, in order to render the appropriate version in the target language, which was Romanian.

Another important point, emphasized during the class discussion, was related to the trainees' level of awareness to their *role as cultural mediators*. Once they are able to acknowledge the part they are required to play in their future profession they become more dedicated to their tasks and more responsible in the way in which they approach each project.

During the discussion, trainees' questions were meant to bring more light to this part of their future profession. In the end it was clear for them that translation is not a mere transfer of information, but rather a complex effort in the realm of cultural similarities and differences.

Among the questions asked by the trainees in the pre-translation stage, several focused on the way in which the translator's acknowledged role as cultural mediator can accommodate the acceptance of political "lies" albeit hindered by euphemisms or presented in positive colours. In their statements, they were of the opinion that the "truth" must remain as such, because it cannot be forever hidden under a set of carefully chosen words in translation.

4.2. Text translation and choice of appropriate procedures

The most important part of this project was the actual translation of the fragments from the two texts, by each group of trainees. As usual, this is the part which students consider as most interesting, as they have the chance to prove their individual skills in the field.

Each group was given a table in which fragments from the source text, divided into smaller paragraphs, were included in the first column, while the other columns were left blank (see Table 1 below). Each group was then asked to negotiate various alternatives and then to come up with a unique variant, agreed by all the members of the group. These variants were then presented to the whole class, in order to be peer-evaluated.

Table 1. Text translation, method(s) and procedures used

<i>Source text</i>	<i>Translation method(s) used</i>	<i>Translation procedures used</i>	<i>Final translation</i>
(The source text is divided into smaller paragraphs)	(Students are invited to choose, to the best of their knowledge, the translation method applicable to each paragraph, focusing either on the SL or the TL)	(Students must read the text carefully and decide what procedure/s is/are the best choice, depending on the style, attitude or purpose of the author)	(Students must produce their own translation, as a result of group decision and to their best knowledge)

This phase of the project focuses on finding the different layers of meaning as intended by the text author, taking into account any elements of propaganda, manipulation or positive/negative politeness, and translating them to the best of trainees' knowledge. As a result, students then view their initial translation in a completely new way and pay increased attention to any hidden elements in the text.

With the thorough text assessment safely behind them, the translation trainees participating in the project realized that they could also be more courageous in their translation choices. It is important to encourage young translators' creativeness but, at the same time, the role of the teacher coordinating the project is always to maintain them within the limits of reasonable message rendering, as this is, at all times, the most important task of any translator.

Creative variants were easily accepted for the source text fragments that used metaphors, complex comparisons or culturally-relevant structures, for which free or idiomatic translation methods were appropriate, along with compensation, shift or modulation as chosen procedures, according to Newmark's taxonomy (1988: 82-83, 90-91); however, trainees were advised to restrict creativity for text parts in which precise data or information, in specific contexts, were important for preserving the clear logic of the text.

In the above cited book, Newmark redefines the methods of translation (focusing on the way in which a whole text is approached, as against the use of translation procedures on smaller units of the text) according to the emphasis placed in translation – either on the source text or on the target text. As such, translators can choose between:

- (a) Placing the emphasis on the source text, and thereby choosing between word-for-word, literal, semantic or faithful translation;

- (b) Focusing on the translated (target) text, and thereby choosing between adaptation, free translation, idiomatic or communicative translation.

Following the teacher's indications, the students participating in the project had to mention the chosen method and procedure(s) used for each part of the text under focus. Here are a few relevant examples:

English (text 1, Obama State of the Union Address, 2017)

Fifteen years that dawned with terror touching our shores; [...] that saw a vicious recession spread across our nation...

Romanian translation:

Sunt cincisprezece ani de când teroarea ne-a lovit țărmlul; [...] de când recesiunea a dat o puternică lovitură națiunii noastre...

Method: *Adaptation*

Procedures: *Shift (transposition)* – change of reader perspective; *Addition; Adaptation* (adding the verb for a better target-language rendering of the meaning)

Truth vs lies assessment:

The speaker's effort to minimize the psychological effect of a tragedy by using a metaphor (and adding a set of positive examples in the following part of the same paragraph).

English (text 2, Obama State of the Union Address, 2016):

Our unemployment rate is now lower than it was before the financial crisis.

Romanian translation:

În prezent, rata șomajului este, la noi, mai mica decât a fost înainte de criza financiară.

Method: *Literal translation* as suggested by students, nevertheless with the appropriate change in the translated sentence structure, according to the Romanian syntactic rules.

Procedure(s): *Direct equivalence*

Truth vs lies assessment:

Avoidance of the negative effect of previous negative information by emphasizing an element of major interest for the citizens (unemployment figures).

English (text 3, Trump Presidential Speech to the nation, 2017):

Since my election, [*major company names*] and many others have announced that they will invest billions of dollars in the US and will create tens of thousands of new American jobs.

Romanian translation:

După alegerile (*pe care le-am câștigat*), (x, y, z...) și multe altele au anunțat că vor investi miliarde de dolari în SUA / în țară și vor crea zeci de mii de slujbe noi (*pentru*) americani.

Method: *Semantic translation*

Procedures: *Adaptation* (filling the information gaps, as needed for the target readers); *Cultural reference* ("in the US" is rendered with "în țară" by some of the

students, seeing there is no need to repeat the name of the country for its own citizens, in the source text)

Truth vs lies assessment:

The use of huge figures in order to impress the audiences; post-electoral promises made in order to persuade the audiences to follow him; the use of persuasion.

English (text 4, Trump Presidential Speech to the nation, 2017):

We will stop the drugs from pouring into our country and poisoning our youth – and we will expand treatment for those who have become so badly addicted.

Romanian translation:

Vom stopa / opri *pătrunderea* drogurilor / *marea de droguri* care ajunge în țara noastră și ne otrăvește tinerii – și vom extinde tratamentele pentru cei ajunși *dependenți* / *fără scăpare*.

Method: *Literal translation* (in some cases) or *Communicative translation* (in other cases)

Procedures: (pointed out in italics above) *Idiomatic translation*; *Metaphors*; *Modulation* (change of the point of view – “*badly addicted*” becomes “*fără scăpare*”)

Truth vs lies assessment:

The use of major promises, in a (presumably) convincing tone, with little chance of actually being achieved in real life. The use of metaphors (drugs “pouring” into the country) in order to impress the audiences (especially middle aged or older people) by referring to a sensitive topic and to an important demographic group (young people).

The examples included herein are only a few that have been selected during the project. Again, the creativity of the translator trainees must be emphasized and appreciated; they did their best to find the alternatives which, to the best of their existing level of knowledge and skills, could render the meaning of the text correctly.

At the same time, they were eager to point out the words or structures that they included in the category of “political lies”. As a general conclusion, they defined the political rhetoric as persuasive, only partially factual, focusing on the audiences’ expectations, rather than on the truth itself.

From the point of view of the context, they were of the opinion that the pragmatic context (the use of emotional emphases, of details considered important by the speaker, of personal beliefs and ideas, which sometimes did not match actual facts) took an important place in the way in which speeches were conceived and rendered orally.

5. Conclusions

The overall goal of this project, besides assessing the students' ability to analyse different types of text and learn new skills was to raise their awareness in making the distinction between what a text "says" or "does not say", in discerning between truth and lie and making the correct choices in translation.

This approach received wide approval from the translation trainees, due to the fact that they were exposed to authentic texts, for the translation of which they were required to use a large number of skills, they had the opportunity to enhance their vocabulary and apply their previous knowledge about translation methods and procedures.

At the same time, the class debates *increased their awareness regarding the issue of "truth and lies"* in the political rhetoric in general, and it was a useful part of the training for future complex texts combining the informative purpose with descriptive and persuasive elements.

The positive response from the participants in the project was, indeed, significant for future attempts at translating different types of text in the training process. The same paradigm can be applied to texts from different areas of interest, among which economics and finance, education, social sciences or even specific cultural structures, such as idioms and proverbs.

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The author

Carmen Ardelean is an Associate Professor of English and Communication, Ph.D. at the Department of Foreign Languages & Communication – Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages, UTCB – Bucharest, Romania. She is the Director of the *Research Centre for Specialized Translation and Intercultural Communication* from the same university. Author of 8 books on Translation Studies and Culture Studies, as well as of more than 60 articles on the same topics. She also holds a Master's Degree in Political Studies.