

Cultural Background as a Precondition of Adequacy in Translation (based on E.Hemingway's short stories)

T. Nekriach, R. Dovganchyna*

Department of Theory and Practice of Translation from English
Institute of Philology, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine
*Corresponding author. E-mail: dovganchyna@ukr.net

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Abstract. The article focuses on the vertical context interpretation in the literary translation of E.Hemingway's prose. The experiment proposed to the graduate students helps to outline the basic challenges brought about by the vertical context for the adequate interpretation of the author's idea and its further reconstruction in translation.

Keywords: vertical context, interpretation, experiment, meaning and sense, understanding, background knowledge, historical and linguistic commentary

As is known, the professional competence of the translator involves, basically, five components:

- proficiency in the native language;
- proficiency in a foreign language;
- acquaintance with fundamental issues of the translation theory and methodology;
- ability to operate various techniques in different text types;
- appropriate level of cultural background.

Apparently, the first two components are purely linguistic. However, it would be unreasonable to suggest that their perfect handling could automatically result in a perfect translation. As G.Miram, a Ukrainian translator and scholar, wittily remarked: to expect that the knowledge of two (or more) languages makes one a highly qualified translator is about as sound as to expect that a person who has two good hands and an excellent piano would immediately turn a virtuoso pianist.

Without knowing how to transfer the content and form of an original literary work into a different culture by using different language signs and at minimal losses, it is impossible to achieve the coveted goal, namely, to create adequate translation.

The rules and regularities of this transfer have to be learnt and mastered. The theory of translation, without being prescriptive, teaches how to make correct and conscious decisions in the process of translation, as well as to justly evaluate the quality of one's own work and the work of one's colleagues. This third component is closely connected with the fourth – the proper manoeuvring of translation tactics and successful application of translation toolkit.

The last but not the least component emphasises the necessity for the translator to possess profound knowledge of historical, literary and cultural issues inherent in the original.

The latent senses in fiction texts create additional dimensions, thus enriching their inimitable artistic value. "The conflict between the explicit text and its latent sense is specifically characteristic of a literary text, – points out N.Valgina, – since external events described in the text very often conceal some inner sense, which is created by the motives underlying those events, the motives that prompted the author to turn to those events rather than the events themselves" [1, p.149]. Those motives can often turn out to be different for different readers, since they are not so much read in the text as guessed to be hypothesized and reconstructed in the reader's mind. Each reader views

the events in their own way, with this view not necessarily corresponding to the author's. That is why the probability of forming an identical concrete sense for both the author and the reader is fairly low. Sometimes the reader can draw even more out of the text or a separate statement than the author might have implied or, conversely, miss the sense the author had in mind. The thorough understanding of the author's text requires its scrupulous analysis and the comparison of all its elements and constituents. Thus, the substitution of some language signs for others cannot be carried out outside the context, because the means of transferring superficial meanings to the levels of latent sense can vary, including even non-verbalized means such as background knowledge, pauses, intonation, parcellation, etc.

I.Gubbenet proposes to designate this latent sense as vertical context: "**Vertical context is a philological problem resolving the ways and reasons for the writer to expect the ability of the reader to perceive the historical and philological information which is endowed objectively in the text created by this writer**" [2, p.8 – emphasised by the author]. This problem acquires a particular significance for translation nowadays, when the generally low level of philological culture results in ruining the vertical context and reduces the reading of literature, particularly classic literature, to a primitive reception of the plot. At present the training of future translators is deficient in serious methodological categories and parameters for the interpretation of a literary text, which are indispensable for adequate translation. Needless to say, the degree and depth of the latent sense perception depends upon various factors inherent in the translator's personality. It is not just erudition and education, but also a subtle intuition, deep insights, spirituality as well as the flair for words and intonation. However, background knowledge is closely connected with the capability to access, measure and interpret the underlying plot. I.Gubbenet defines background knowledge as a sociocultural stock to characterize artistic writing that can be regarded as a segment in language and cultural studies, while the vertical context is the historical and philological context of a specific literary work, thus making it a segment of philology [ibid, p.5]. Translation students must be taught at least the historical and philological minimum to develop the skills of interpreting a literary text.

In order to find out whether translation students can encompass the vertical context, we turned to the stories of

Ernest Hemingway, a prominent American author famous for creating latent senses. One hundred translation students (actually, one hundred and three) of the III-V years of studying at the Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv were asked the following questions after reading one of the best known stories by Ernest Hemingway "Cat in the Rain":

1. *Where is the scene laid? Why do you think the American couple has arrived in this country? Justify your answers.*
 2. *What historical period do the events of the story take place in? Find indications in the text.*
 3. *How old are the husband and wife?*
 4. *How can their relationship be defined:*
 - friendly;
 - loving, tender, fond;
 - indifferent;
 - hostile.
- Substantiate your answers with references to the text.*
5. *How long can they have been married? Give your reasons.*
 6. *What is the role of the hotel keeper in the story?*
 7. *Do certain specific textual elements have a symbolic meaning? If so, which ones and why?*
 8. *Is 'the big tortoise-shell cat' the same 'cat in the rain'? Prove your point.*
 9. *Does the story have a regular, canonical beginning and ending?*
 10. *What do you think can happen with the couple in the future?*

Symptomatically, all the students outlined the action of the story as occurred a few years after the war, but very few realized that it was the First, not the Second, World War. The text has a direct marker – "*the war monument*", to look at which the Italians came from long way off, so the monument is a new one, freshly set up. Only 6 % of the respondents recalled the 'lost generation', though without understanding the essence of this social, historical and psychological phenomenon. However, the "lost generation" is the key to understanding both this story and Hemingway's entire work between the two world wars. All the students, without exception, defined the relationship between the man and his wife in the story as indifferent, but their views on the reasons for it varied: some think that the main reason lies in their age disparity, others see it in the dulling of their feelings throughout their long marriage, still others – that they can't have children. There was even a version that the American wife had cancer, because her hair was bobbed (as if after chemotherapy), and she dreamed of having long hair and making a big knot at the back that she could feel. Sad it is, but even these painful problems of today cannot but tell on the interpretation of literary pieces. Perhaps this accounts for the high value of literature: each generation will find in the more significant works the reflection of acute problems, which forever make a coveted emotional and aesthetical impact on the reader. The translator, however, cannot be guided by the emotional perception solely: s/he should always remain a poised, sensible and thoughtful interpreter of the author's intent.

The questions asked in the experiment involve the knowledge of the historical and social atmosphere in Europe and the USA after the First World War, which actu-

ally gave birth to the lost generation with its individual-psychological disharmony. This is Hemingway's recurrent motive which did not have to be brought home to his contemporaries, not to mention his countrymen. Understanding the situation in general, the author's peers could easily restore the symbolic and psychological structure of the whole work, but in the course of time this understanding underwent changes. Our experiment has shown principal discrepancies.

The respondents do not realize that George – "the American husband" – is embittered by the war and has lost his bearings in life. So, like Hemingway himself and a lot of other men, both real and fictional, who went through the war, he cannot find a secure place for himself and travels from country to country, reluctant to anchor anywhere, to have children, to settle down in his own home. The ferocious whirlpool of the First World War made them realize very painfully the fragility of human life, the flimsiness of shelter which can be turned into a human slaughterhouse in no time. The war ruined all the ideals of the 19th century, destroyed the preceding value system, with the new value system not having been formed yet. That's what happened to George in the story. Bearing in mind the conditions under which the story was written and evaluating its place in E.Hemingway's literary heritage, in other words, taking into account extratextual and subtextual factors, we outline George's age as 25 or 26, not 40-45, as most students felt it, considering his general indifference and despondency. The hotel owner, "padrone", on the contrary, is an old man who belongs to a different generation and has seen quite a number of social disasters, so the war has not shattered his ideas of the Good and the Evil. He remains faithful to his basic ethical principles, committed to his essential life cause, respectful and sympathetic towards people. These two characters are constructed on contrast. However, it is only possible to see this contrast with the adequate amount of background knowledge. The "bloody wheel" of the war had rolled over both the padrone and George, but the effect was different. That the hotel owner also experienced the horrors of the war personally is signalled by the newly-erected war monument in his native town (Italy, as is known, was one of the major bridgeheads of the First World War).

The misunderstanding of the author's artistic scheme is also conducive to the wrong assessment of George's wife's age and aspirations by the respondents. She cannot be much older than 20 or 22. It is not for nothing that E.Hemingway refers to her as "girl" eight times and never refers to her as "woman". Upon their returning from the battlefields of the world war yesterday's American soldiers were received as heroes at home, young girls were falling in love with them, they got married hastily – and reciprocal disappointment and alienation did not delay to come up. The girls could not comprehend their husbands' spiritual void and were dreaming about traditional, conventional relationship and setting:

"I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I feel... I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her... And I want to eat at a table with my own silver, and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush up my hair out in front of the mirror and I want the kitty and I want some new clothes" [5, p.359] – *"Мені хочеться гладенько й*

туго зачесати коси назад і стягти їх у великий вузол на потилиці, щоб відчувати його... **І хочеться** посадити на коліна кицю і щоб вона муркотіла, коли я гладитиму її... **А ще хочу** їсти за своїм столом, і мати своє столове срібло, і щоб горіли свічки. **Хочу**, щоб була весна, і **хочу** розчісувати коси перед дзеркалом, і **хочу** кицю, і **хочу** мати нові сукні” [3, p.90-91].

Instead, the young wives were taken to Europe, which seemed exciting and exhilarating at first, but became boring and frustrating very soon. A lot of marriages got ruined at that time.

Gaps in the knowledge of historical and cultural nature prevent the respondents from the correct estimation of the symbolic plane of the story. The key symbols are included in the very title – “cat” and “rain”. It is worth mentioning, in passing, that all the translators of this story managed to convey its gender markedness: *кішка* (female), not *кіт* (male). This translation gives the connotative meaning of cosiness, warmth and tenderness. This symbol is not unambiguous. The American girl wants to have “that kitty”, although the couple’s way of life on the move, their staying at the hotels could hardly make the little pet happy. *Cat* also symbolizes and personifies a baby, a little dependent creature, coveted by any married young woman. The very title of the story implies drama, if not tragedy – “Cat in the Rain”. What can be less appealing for a warmth-loving cat than a cold rain? Incidentally, *rain* belongs to negative symbols in Hemingway’s artistic system. *Cat* does not only signify a baby, but also the American girl herself: she, too, feels as unprotected and insecure in her life as a little cat in the rain. That is why she is so fond of the old *padrone*: she feels his reliability, supportiveness and integrity, which her husband George obviously lacks.

The echoes of war sound implicitly in most of E.Hemingway’s works and only close reading can ensure deep insights and thorough grasp of the author’s intended messages. In reading his short story “A Canary for One”, the reader can encounter various poignant allusions to the war:

“*The fortifications were leveled but grass had not grown*” [5, p.321] – “*Передміські укріплення були зрівнянні з землею, але трава ще не виросла*” [3, p.450].

The grammatical category of Perfect is absent in the Ukrainian language, that is why the translator uses the intensifier “*ще не*” (“*not yet*”). It helps the reader to understand that very little time passed after the war, and its consequences are still evident. Other war indications can be found in these sentences:

“*All that the train passed through looked as though it were before breakfast*” [5, p.320] – “*Все, що минав поїзд, мало свіжий вранішній вигляд, наче ще до сніданку*” [3, p.449].

“*Nothing had eaten any breakfast*” [5, p.320] – “*І все те було свіже, наче перед сніданком*” [3, p.449].

The Ukrainian translation seems to have misinterpreted the author’s implication in the phrase “*everything was fresh as before breakfast*”. Not only the implications suggested by Perfect are lost, but the message itself is transfigured. “*Fresh*” has definite positive connotations, whereas the word “*breakfast*” literally refers to breaking the fasting period of the preceding night. It originates in the Christian custom of fasting before receiving Holy Communion the following morning (this Eucharistic fast is still observed by Orthodox Christians, but is shortened

to one hour before Mass for Roman Catholics). Abstaining from food was an act of self-denial and personal sacrifice to honor God, but it was not easy to everyone to observe, as long as it required a certain strain of will. The Russian version proposes “*Все было словно натощак*” [4, p.765], what literally means “*Everything looked as it was on an empty stomach*” or “*as it was fasting*”. This translation is closer to the original and does not significantly diminish the tragic motives of the story the scene of which is laid in the postwar world. It was the world trying to heal its wounds inflicted by the war. Those wounds must have held back George (“*Cat in the Rain*”) from forming a functional family, and in his endless purposeless travels create the illusion of escape from his painful memories. In his novel “*The Sun Also Rises*” Ernest Hemingway wrote this: “*Going to another country doesn’t make any difference. I’ve tried all that. You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There’s nothing to that*” [5]. But most of E.Hemingway’s characters are on the restless move, and the geography of his stories embrace various parts of the world. The reader can travel to France with the frustrated characters of the story “*A Canary for One*”:

“*The train crossed a river and passed through a very carefully tended forest. The train passed through many outside of Paris towns. There were tram-cars in the towns and big advertisements for the Belle Jardinière and Dubonnet and Pernod on the walls toward the train*” [3, p.320] – “*Поїзд переїхав міст через річку і мчав тепер чистим, обайливо доглянутим лісом. Ось уже за вікном замиготіли паризькі передмістя. Там їздили трамваї, а на стінах, звернених до залізниці, були великі рекламні оголошення: “Бель Жардінєр”, “Дюбоне”, “Перно”*” [5, p.449].

Most travelers of Hemingway’s time could have easily imagined the localities described by E.Hemingway and understood that the forest in question was Bois de Vincennes lying in the eastern outskirts of Paris, which is the largest public park in the city today. In those days the French railway system crossed this large park and led to Paris-Gare de Lyon, but now there are just flower beds and fountains. So, the reader of today can be puzzled why a post war forest used to be so carefully tended. Even if those geographical and historical facts are known to the translator, the author’s ambiguity should be preserved: “*park*” is not to be substituted for “*forest*”. According to the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: “*Languages are formed in different landscapes and by different experiences, their incongruity is natural. It is wrong, for example, to assume that what in Spanish is called a bosque is the same thing that in German is called a Wald, and yet the dictionary tells us that Wald means bosque, and that bosque means forest*” [6]. The best way is to be reader-friendly and provide a footnote or a commentary at the end of the text, which helps the reader to visualize the location.

As long as proper names belong to cultural units, the translator has a number of avenues to render them in translation. They can be reproduced with the help of **transcoding** (*New-York – Нью-Йорк, The Daily Mail – Дейлі мейл*), **conventional correspondents** (*Gare de Lyon – Ліонський вокзал, Paris – Париж*) or **explicative translation** (“*The Trois Couronnes*” – готель “*Три корони*”).

However, the translator should anticipate the transparency and implicit connotations of all proper names they deal with. For instance, when he mentions a part of New York city, E.Hemingway gives the clue to the American lady's financial and social status: "*up-town in New-York*" [3, p.321]. The heart of New York – Manhattan is loosely divided into Downtown (Lower Manhattan), Midtown (Midtown Manhattan), and Uptown (Upper Manhattan). Uptown was the home of affluent people in the early 20 century and was thought of as a more prestigious area than Downtown. The Ukrainian translation "*в Нью-Йорку*" ("*in New-York*") [5, p.450] lost those connotations. The Russian translation adapted this demographic indication: "*в центре Нью-Йорка*" ("*in the center of New York*") [4, p.765]. At the time when the Russian translation appeared, most Soviet people associated the residing in the city center as a privilege.

Still, certain omissions in translation are fairly reasonable. The vivid example is the translation of the phrase "*a half-bottle of Evian water*" [3, p.318] – "*пляшка мінеральної води*" ("*a bottle of mineral water*") [5, p.448]. A native English speaker will take it for granted that "half-bottle" is a bottle half the size of a standard bottle of wine, beer, water etc, usually 375 ml (in contrast to the full bottle of 500 ml), what is more convenient for a trip. But the alternative in the Russian translation "*полбутылки минеральной воды*" ("*a half-bottle of mineral water*") [4, p.762] is sure to evoke a distorted visual image, namely, a half-emptied standard bottle. The Ukrainian translator neglected the size of the bottle ("пляшка"). Both Ukrainian and Russian translators resorted to generalization in reproducing the brand of mineral water chosen by that rich American lady, because in the time of publication Evian was not at all known in the Soviet Union and could not form any "associative train" in the minds of the reader. She bought the brand of mineral water which, in popular culture, connotes luxury. Incidentally, Evian water is now well-known on the post-Soviet territory.

The cultural realium in the phrase "*...and the American lady put herself in charge of one of three men from Cook's...*" [3, p.322] is clear for most Americans. Thomas Cook was the English founder of the travel agency Thomas Cook & Son, popularly nicknamed Cook's Tours. Thomas Cook started his international travel company in 1841, with a successful one-day rail excursion for

one shilling from Leicester to Loughborough on 5 July. Those humble beginnings launched Thomas Cook's new kind of company – designed to help the Britons see the world. At the end of 1850, having already visited Wales, Scotland and Ireland, Thomas Cook began to contemplate foreign trips to Europe, the United States and the Holy Land. So, Thomas Cook meant the world's best-known name in travel, whose inspiration and commitment opened the New World to Britons and Europe to Americans. However, hardly any Soviet citizen was aware of this information when the translations into Russian and, later on, into Ukrainian were published. Taking into account that Soviet people had flimsy chances to travel abroad, the Ukrainian translation provides the contextual explanation: "*Американка звернулася до одного з трьох агентів фірми Кука*" ("*the American woman addressed one of three agents of Cook's firm*") [5, p.451], whereas some redundant features of formal style can be observed in the Russian translation: "*...и американка вверила свою особу попечениям одного из трех агентов Кука*" ("*...and the American woman entrusted her person in the hands of one of Cook's three agents*") [4, p.766]. The words "*особа*" ("*person*"), "*вверить*" ("*entrust*"), "*агенты*" ("*agents*") are conducive to a register shift in the whole stylistic perspective of the short story "*A Canary for One*". Moreover, the word "agent" seems to have more associations with the intelligence service than with a harmless travelling company.

Background knowledge is indispensable for awareness that the process of translation does not differ much from the process of creating the original text, and is by no means simpler. The translator as the most attentive reader and the most scrupulous interpreter of any literary text, – particularly, a text written by such a sophisticated author as E.Hemingway, abounding in latent meanings, – has to measure, first and foremost, the value of each verbal and imagery element of the work under translation and find its adequate correspondence, sometimes, perhaps, outside the text itself – in the commentary aimed at filling the gaps in the reader's background knowledge. Without this, E.Hemingway's work can turn into a cheap popular print or a number of puzzles (we'd dare to suppose, not for the target readers only). It means that the role of the translator becomes even more important because s/he is responsible for the acceptance of the translated texts in the receiving culture.

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