

STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SIBERIA IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates the sociocultural impact of translation by examining reports about Siberia from foreign travelers and writers in the seventeenth century. The main research method is from Jerzy Bartmiński, who founded the Ethnolinguistics School of Lublin, and his cognitive approach (Bartmiński 2009). The current study is a continuation of our extensive research related to the stereotypes that represent colloquial images of Siberia and the Cognitive Definition of Siberia among Spanish speakers on the Iberian Peninsula. This Cognitive Definition is based on linguistic units found in Spanish corpora spanning from 1736 to 2014. The aim of this paper is to trace how the translation of works by scientists who first wrote about Siberia in the seventeenth century contributed to the penetration of stereotypical ideas about this region into different cultures, particularly within Spanish culture.

Keywords: translation, stereotypes, Siberia, cognitive definition

1. Introduction

Siberia is a region frequently portrayed in both general and scholarly literature as a mysterious and elusive entity, shaped by a complex combination of historical, geographical, and political factors. Notably, references to Siberia can be found in various places in the world. There are areas called La Siberia in Mexico and in Bolivia. In Spain, La Siberia Extremeña is a region in the province of Badajoz. Its appellation draws inspiration from the adverse connotations associated with Siberia, denoting isolation and a dearth of communication routes. Indeed, certain authors have advocated for the removal of the term ‘Siberia’ due to its negative implications: “And there is nothing more to say about this region, which certainly does not deserve the name of

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Siberia, as it is commonly referred to everywhere”¹ (Vera Camacho 1960: 210 - translated by the author).

This raises questions: Why does this place in Spain not deserve the name Siberia? What distinguishes the semantic structure of this toponym? How is knowledge about a place structured? To elucidate these matters, we can consider the following example:

mandar, enviar ‘send’
a Siberia ‘to Siberia’
ir ‘go’

The first interpretation of this sentence, combining a verb of movement (*mandar, enviar* ‘send’) with a prepositional phrase of movement (*a Siberia* ‘to Siberia’), refers to an exact definition, to encyclopedic knowledge. The second interpretation of the example pertains to common knowledge, to people’s opinion, those who can probably understand Siberia as a place of exile. Thus, to comprehend this linguistic phenomenon, stereotypes prove to be useful. The general idea of what is a stereotype is based on Putnam’s proposal of linguistic meaning, a concept we will delve into in the theoretical section.

The contemporary image of Siberia in Spain, much like in other regions, took shape incrementally, through the overlap of diverse historical, political, and social events. As Alekseev (1941) points out, Spain, witnessing an economic and political heyday in the sixteenth century, was not interested in Northern Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but rather its gaze was aimed towards the west, south and east. This was due particularly to the infrequent diplomatic interactions between Spain and the Muscovite state. Therefore, where did their knowledge about Siberia in Spanish come from? If someone has written about Siberia, it is likely that they gained their knowledge from either original language sources, using the SL (source language) or translated books into Spanish using the TL (target language), whether directly or indirectly, via some IL (intermediary language). In Spain, Latin served as the language of education for centuries, until a significant shift occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Specifically, French gradually assumed prominence due to a distinct historical and socio-cultural context (Roig 1995). During this era, translation primarily involved not only French texts but also from French² itself: “In other words, with the exception of Italian and Portuguese, most modern European languages are translated, not always, but indeed many times, via the French version” (Pajares Infante 1996:166 - translated by the author). In fact, the first detailed mention of Siberia in the Diachronic Corpus of Spanish dates back to 1736, where information derived from a French dictionary was incorporated:

Let’s see if we can comprehend under this system **the bones of elephants from Siberia**, which is undoubtedly a somewhat **more challenging matter, given that the icy climate of that region is very much contrary to the temperament of elephants**, which require

¹ Citations in other languages have been translated into English by the author. Due to the limited length, we do not provide the original versions.

² French serves as the intermediary language.

warm climates, as experience teaches. [...] First of all, **Siberia is not excessively cold in all its extent**, as stated in the Great Moréri Dictionary. And the fact that **elephants can live in a cold region**, as long as it's not excessively so, is proven by the elephant that we mentioned above, which the King of Portugal sent to the King of France. This elephant, having arrived in Paris in the year 1668, did not die until the year 1681. (1736; REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Banco de datos [CORDE] [en línea]. Corpus diacrónico del español - translated by the author)³

The author of this fragment in Spanish is Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, who explicitly mentions the French historical dictionary *Le Grand Dictionnaire historique, ou le mélange curieux de l'histoire sacrée et profane* by Louis Moréri (1725). Feijoo considered French as the language of the modern era, serving as the conduit for modern science and new knowledge: “Two ways to achieve it: develop the teaching of French or translate fundamental works into Spanish” (Roig 1994: 36 - translated by the author).

Returning to Feijoo's fragment, it is also important to highlight the description of Siberia in Spanish. Feijoo not only shared his reflections on the climate in Siberia but also presented the stereotypical image of elephants, which were actually mammoths. Lacking modern scientific knowledge, the author placed elephants in Siberia.

This raises the question: How did Spanish authors in the eighteenth century construct stereotypical descriptions of Siberia within Spanish culture? To explore this question, we can formulate a hypothesis: Spanish writers likely relied on external sources to acquire knowledge about Siberia. Therefore, as texts by French, Dutch, German scholars, and other authors contained stereotypes about Siberia, these stereotypes must have influenced Spanish authors. Before delving into this question, it is important to gain an understanding of what a stereotype is and what the stereotypical characteristics attributed to Siberia are among Spanish speakers.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Stereotype

Putnam (1975: 190) proposed to “define the ‘meaning’ by using the normal form description, similar to a ‘vector.’” He distinguished stereotypes from Syntactic Markers, Semantic Markers, and Extension. For example, the normal form description for water is presented in Table 1:

Syntactic Markers	Semantic Markers	Stereotype	Extension
mass noun	natural kind	colorless	H2O (give or take impurities)
concrete	Liquid	transparent	
		tasteless	
		thirst- quenching, etc.	

Table 1: The normal form description for water (Putnam 1975: 190).

³ In the subsequent examples, only the year and the corpus name will be provided as references.

Putnam's theory was further developed by Jerzy Bartmiński, a Polish linguist and founder of the Lublin Ethnolinguistic school. His contribution is innovative, as he defines stereotypes⁴ as a general mechanism for organizing knowledge about entities, such as objects, acts, and relationships:

A stereotype is a] kind of collection of trivial bits of information about an object, accompanied by the establishment of the place of the object's name in the lexical system of the language, gives an extensive characteristic of the subject, involves it in an extensive network of relationships, reconstructs its socially entrenched linguo-cultural picture. (Bartmiński 2009: 31)

It is important to emphasize that stereotypes are primarily considered cognitive phenomena⁵, representing a socially determined minimum set of data. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that linguistic communities are not homogeneous. Hence, the *division of linguistic labor* (Putnam 1975) plays a significant role. According to this theory, knowledge is unevenly distributed among community members, for example, between:

- 'experts,' who know the criteria for determining an extension;
- 'non-experts,' who only possess the minimum amount of information, including the stereotype, sufficient for understanding and using the word.

This phenomenon can be explained through the lens of distributed cognition⁶ (Sharifian 2017), the cognitive mechanism that explains the process by which elements are not equally shared among speakers of a community.

The term *stereotypes* in the Putnamian context arises from philosophical epistemology. Bartmiński has defined the stereotype while adapting it to the tasks of constructing an adequate definition and creating a new type of dictionary. It is possible to unify all the stereotypical features in what Bartmiński calls *cognitive definition*.

2.2. Cognitive Definition

The method of *cognitive definition*, employed in the Polish dictionary *Słownik Stereotypów i Symboli Ludowych* (1996-2021) by Bartmiński, significantly differs from traditional lexicographic definitions (Bartmiński 2009, 2013, 2018; Wierzbicka 2013; Mierzwinska-Hajnos 2013; Tolstaja 2015). The role of the cognitive definition is to capture semantic markers, or what Putnam referred to as 'stereotypical' elements. Thus, it consolidates all stereotypical features within a cognitive definition:

The cognitive definition aims to portray how an entity is viewed by the speakers of a language, to represent socio-culturally established and linguistically entrenched knowledge, its categorisation and valuation. (Bartmiński 2009: 67)

⁴ It is crucial not to confuse the stereotype with the prototype (Carisio 2020) and what are known as 'social stereotypes' (Carisio forthcoming)

⁵ Umberto Eco (2016 (1997)) illustrated the conceptualization process through which we form stereotypes. For instance, he examined the process of defining certain animals for the first time, such as the Cognitive Type of the horse that the Aztecs formed.

⁶ Enrique Bernárdez defines this phenomenon as synergic cognition in his work *El lenguaje como cultura* (2008).

The cognitive definition is developed in terms of facets, homogeneous blocks (semantic subcategories) that emerge from the analysis in the form of sentences. The selection and arrangement of these facets should reflect the way in which cognitive content is structured (Bartmiński 2018: 756).

3. Methodology

This analysis is a continuation of our extensive work related to the Cognitive Definition of Siberia, based on linguistic units in Spanish corpora: Diachronic Corpus of Spanish (CORDE), the Corpus of Reference of Actual Spanish (CREA) and the Corpus of the Spanish of the XXI Century (CORPES XXI). The work has so far resulted in an analysis of occurrences of *Siberia* and *siberian** in Spanish and the proposition of the Cognitive Definition of Siberia⁷ for Spanish speakers (Carisio forthcoming). The corpora provide information about the publication dates of the works or the years during which they were developed. The linguistic use of *Siberia* and *siberian** reflected in 1,112 examples in corpora have provided us with a significant number of stereotypes covering the period from 1736 to 2014. All the linguistic material has been organized with the help of the ATLAS.ti computer tool that allowed us to encode stereotypes.⁸ Based on our analysis, a simplified version of the Cognitive Definition of Siberia is:

a vast, desolate, desert and steppe terrain, very distant country, far away from everything; situated in the northern region, covering the entire territory from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean;
is a sad and inhospitable place, where exiled criminals and political dissidents, indigenous people, Cossacks, and shamans live;
the place of prison, death for many people, and punishment;
habitat of the Siberian Tiger, full of reindeer and the remains of mammoths;
rich in natural resources, minerals, and furs.⁹

Thus, the written references from corpora show the main stages in the evolution of stereotypical ideas about Siberia. Moreover, in the CORDE the first descriptions of Siberia between 1736 and 1750 contain stereotypical descriptions, such as:

- Cold
- Immense and distant
- Place of exile (Tsars)
- Inhabitants: Siberians and criminals

⁷ This was the main objective of my PhD thesis.

⁸ All the fragments about Siberia from the three corpora were loaded into the ATLAS.ti program. Subsequently, the coding process (a term employed by the program itself) was carried out, in which each code represents a stereotypical feature found in the text.

⁹ An analysis of the frequency of the stereotypical elements forming the Cognitive Definition is provided in the article “Cultural Conceptualization of SIBERIA in Spanish corpora” by Carisio (forthcoming).

- Remains of elephants
- Ivory trade
- Great flood

These stereotypic characteristics are primarily based on written references rather than direct knowledge of the linguistic community. According to the Diachronic Corpus of Spanish, as we mentioned above, the first occurrence of Siberia dates back to 1736, and in the Spanish National Library, first appears in 1740. The earlier mention of ‘Siberia’ in Google Books Ngram Viewer (Spanish corpus) is from 1672, although without specific details. For the current work, we try to trace how stereotypes about Siberia from different books and source languages were transferred to other target languages through translation. To achieve this goal, we utilize Mijail Alekseev’s book titled *Siberia as reported by foreign travelers and writers. Introduction, texts, and comments. XIII-XVII centuries* (1941)¹⁰ as our corpus. This book contains fragments of texts about Siberia from 49 European authors’ books, 28 of which are from seventeenth century books.¹¹

The oldest Western European news reports are few, as a result they are reproduced almost in their entirety in Alekseev’s book. Nonetheless, in the eighteenth century, more often we come across not individual references to Siberia but rather entire works, in the form of journal references to Siberia. In foreign literature about Siberia, perhaps the most important part is news or reports about Siberia from foreign travelers and writers. The most significant portion originates as of the eighteenth century, known as the era of the great Siberian geographical expeditions, which were primarily led by foreign scientists, most of whom were of German origin.

4. Stereotypical Descriptions about Siberia in the Seventeenth Century

As of the middle of the sixteenth century, a number of persistent people began attempting to enter Siberia. Nonetheless, almost nobody, not only in Spain but also in Europe, who wrote about Siberia had ever visited the region. Despite not personally visiting Siberia, they were able to collect interesting data about this country from literature and through oral inquiries.

Since the scope of this article is limited, we will only present a few notable fragments taken from Alekseev (1941). For example, one of the most outstanding works on Siberia at the beginning of the seventeenth century belongs to the Dutchman Isaac Massa who, despite never having been to Siberia, managed to gather valuable information about it through interviews with several people in Moscow. For instance, Massa published two articles on Russian events and the geography of the Land of Samoyeds, the latter called *Beschryvinghe van der Samoyeden Landt in Tartarien* (1612). This article was translated from Dutch into Latin (1613), from Latin into

¹⁰ The original title is *Sibir' v izvestijax inostrannyx putešestvennikov i pisatelej. Vvedenie, teksty i kommentarii. XIII-XVII vv.*

¹¹ We loaded the fragments into ATLAS.ti and analyzed them employing the same methodology used for the analysis of Spanish corpora.

French (1613) and German (1613), from German into Russian (in the eighteenth century), and into English (1625). The original text and translations contain principal stereotypes reproduced in the eighteenth century. One of these stereotypical characteristics is the place of exile: “At first, Muscovites were frightened if, having displeased someone, they heard the word “Siberia,” because they were usually sent there as punishment” (Massa cited in Alekseev 1941: 263 - translated by the author). Additionally, descriptions of nature are significant; for example, the author mentions big rivers and the connection of Siberia with America. The central focus is on the description of Samoyeds: “Samoyeds, as mentioned earlier, fed mostly on the meat of wild animals” (Ibidem).

Furthermore, it is necessary to emphasize the book *Beschreibung der muscowitischen und persischen Reise* by Adam Olearius, published in 1647. For us it is a relevant travel narrative that provides information about Siberia. Olearius kept a travel diary, recording a wide variety of data, and subsequently wrote a book that became famous as one of the best works about Russia in the seventeenth century. During his stay in Moscow in 1643, Olearius met with the Samoyeds. Their conversation provided material for a special chapter in his book, titled “Von Beschaffenheit der Nordländer und den Völkern Samojedem” (1647). Olearius not only transcribed his conversations but also researched literature about northern peoples in general. Additionally, according to Alekseev, Olearius provided a realistic interpretation of popular legend: stories of people with dog-like heads, covered in fur. These stories originated from the clothing worn by northern peoples, with fur on the outside. His book was translated into Dutch (1651), French (1656), Italian (1658), English (1666), and Russian (nineteenth century), allowing the transfer of stereotypes of a long winter, cold climate, abundance of reindeers, and valuable fur, as well as the idea that the region was inhabited by pagan Samoyeds. His book offers detailed depictions of Siberia:

[...] these countries, due **to the harsh air, long winters, and short summers**, are completely **barren** and especially **unsuited for agriculture** (both for grain and for fruit trees), such that the **inhabitants know nothing about grain**, but due **to the abundance of game and fish in vast wild places**, in rivers and lakes, they feed on these, **dress in animal skins and pay their taxes**. (Olearius cited in Alekseev 1941: 293 - translated by the author)

Another author who stereotypically describes Samoyeds is Samuel Collins:

No one but themselves understands either their **barbaric language or the laws** they adhere to in secret. It is difficult **to distinguish a woman from a man by their faces**: none of them have a beard, and all of them **have monkey-like faces**. Their **customs, language and religion are very crude**, because they worship the sun and the moon; **adoration and deification of sunlight**, however, is quite natural for them, since they use **it so little in winter**. (Collins cited in Alekseev 1941: 378)

This fragment is from Collins’s book *The Present State of Russia, in a letter to a friend at London, written by a Eminent Person, residing at the Great Tzars Court in*

Mosco for the Space of nine years. The book was published in 1671 after Collins's death and later translated into French (1679) and Russian (nineteenth century). In addition to Samoyeds, it is worth mentioning briefly that this book includes stereotypical characteristics of Siberia such as steppe terrain, an abundance of reindeers, fur and fish, as well as the crude customs, language, and religion (paganism) of Samoyeds.

Next, we can highlight the work of John Milton *A brief History of Moscovia and of other less known Countries lying eastward of Russia as far as Cathay. Gather'd from Writings of several Eye-witnesses* published in 1682. This work was not independent but rather a compilation from various sources that repeated stereotypical descriptions, including those of Samoyeds and reindeers.

Moreover, Pierre-Martin de La Martinière's book *Voyage des pays septentrionaux. Dans lequel se void les moeurs, manière de vivre et superstitions des Norvègiens, Lapons, Kiloppes, Borandiens, Sybèriens, Semojèdes, Zemblins et Islandais*, originally published in 1671, was translated into English in 1674 and also into German in 1675. This work provided stereotypical descriptions of a cold climate and desolate terrain that was difficult to inhabit:

We crossed the mountains that separate Borandai¹² from Siberia, and the trip was **very challenging and difficult** owing to **the desolation of these places**. They **cannot be inhabited** due to **their barrenness and the abundance of snow**, as well as the **excessive number of polar bears and wolves**. [...] As for those **who were born in Siberia**, they **do not significantly differ from the Samoyeds**, Borandais, and other northerners, both in character, attire, and way of life. (La Martinière cited in Alekseev 1941: 317-318 - translated by the author)

In the seventeenth century, another main stereotypical characteristic of Siberia appeared in news or reports from foreign travelers that included elephant remains. The absence of modern scientific knowledge led to the belief that these supposed elephants were present in cold Siberia. For instance, Josias Logan, the representative of the British Muscovy Company at Pechora, wrote in a letter to Richard Hakluyt:

There used to come hither in the Winter about two thousand Samoyeds with their Commodities, which may be such as we dreamed not on yet. For by chance one came to us with a **piece of an Elephants Tooth** [...]. (Logan 1611 cited in Alekseev 1941: 218)

Heinrich Wilhelm Ludolf, a German scholar, published his thoughts about elephants and mammoths in Siberia and about the Great flood that may have caused the appearance of elephants in the region in *Grammatica Russica quae continet non tantum praecipue fundamenta Russicae Linguae, verum etiam manudictionem quandam ad Grammaticam Slavonicam* (1696), translated into English in 1698:

A piece of **mammoth bone** was given to me by one of my friends, who, as he told me, received it from a Russian nobleman returning from Siberia. In my opinion, it's a **real ivory**. More informed people told me that this **mammoth bone** is actually **elephant**

¹² This is a part of the mainland between Pechora and Khaypudyr Bay (Alekseev 1941: 316).

tusks. It is likely that they were deposited there during **the Great flood** and, over a long period, became increasingly covered by earth. (Ludolf 1696 cited in Alekseev 1941: 543 - translated by the author)

The theme of elephant bones and the Great flood is repeated in the Diachronic Corpus of Spanish in the eighteenth century as discussed by Benito Jerónimo Feijoo in his *Teatro Crítico Universal* (1736), as noted in the introduction to this article.

The portrayal of Siberia often depended on whether the work was an original composition or a compilation. In the case of compilations, stereotypical characteristics about Siberia were often repeated, drawing on the evaluations of previous writers. For example, authors frequently described Siberian inhabitants as ‘a barbaric and wild tribe’ (Johann Balak 1581 cited in Alekseev 1941: 183–184); ‘these are the barbarians, Tatars, and pagans’ (Olearius 1647 cited in Alekseev 1941: 294). However, this limited perspective was influenced by an underdeveloped state of anthropology and ethnography as science. People were often marginalized, and many descriptions exhibited a negative approach and a division into categories of ‘us’ and ‘others.’

Original works, on the other hand, were based on someone’s personal observations. For instance, Samuel Collins (Alekseev 1941: 373) had a background in natural history education and a strong interest in medicine, which influenced his approach to characterizing the flora and fauna of Siberia.

5. Conclusion

Siberia is a culturally constructed concept influenced by shared information derived from written material and personal experiences. In the modern study of Siberia, current historical analysis shows how the meaning of a word is gradually enriched. Starting from the Cognitive Definition of Siberia among Spanish speakers on the Iberian Peninsula, this work allows us to trace how stereotypes from different books and languages were transferred to other languages through translation. Although it is almost impossible to precisely determine which foreign authors Spanish writers read and which translations were used, some studies suggest a connection primarily to the French language. Nevertheless, the available information on news translations suggests that some European speakers share similar stereotypical characteristics of Siberia. This commonality is rooted in their historical foundation based on original or translated literature.

For instance, stereotypical characteristics found in the CORDE from 1736 to 1750 have their sources in the works of seventeenth-century scholars. Typical stereotypes about Samoyeds are evident in the works of Olearius, Massa, Collins, and La Martinière. Massa’s work presents Siberia as a place of exile; La Martinière describes it as a desolate, immense, and distant place; Collins portrays Siberia as a steppe terrain; and Ludolf discusses remains of elephants and the Great Flood. These texts were originally written in different European languages and were translated into English, French, German, Dutch, and others.

Some of the stereotypes, originally found in seventeenth-century texts, passed into other languages through translations. Consequently, these stereotypes formed the

cognitive part of the word's meaning, as we observed in the Cognitive Definition of Siberia in the Spanish language. Shared knowledge within a collective entity is based on information derived from various sources, including historical and specific textual materials. Therefore, the knowledge of Siberia comprises a subset of characteristics that vary from one speaker to another and evolve over time, with some stereotypes being replaced by others. This study illustrates the socio-cultural impact of translation, showing how translation of seventeenth century texts created a pathway for stereotypes to influence the meaning of words in different languages. This work lays the groundwork for future advancements in exploring stereotypes within the field of translation. This involves adapting the methodology to contemporary realities and could be used, for example, to analyze the representation of war in translated literature.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.