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INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT IN THE FRENCH TRANSLATION OF HRANT MATEVOSYAN'S NOVEL *AUTUMN SUN*: CURSES AND BLESSINGS

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Abstract: The core objective of this article is to tackle the problem of the translation of ‘culturemes.’ In our research we have focused on cultural translation, especially the issue of cultural inequivalence or loss of cultural elements with regard to the translation of curses and blessings in Hrant Matevosyan’s novel “*Autumn Sun*.”

Key words: intercultural conflict, translation, realia, curses, blessings

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze and reveal translation inaccuracies with regard to the linguocultural peculiarities inherent in the curses and blessings contained in Hrant Matevosyan’s *Autumn Sun*. We also aim to highlight the important role of the translator in finding the closest equivalent of those ‘culturemes’ in the translation process and successfully reproducing the overall cultural image depicted through the text.

2. Cultural Aspect of Translation

Prior to starting our analysis, it should be mentioned that M. De Carlo, Doctor in General Didactology of Languages and Cultures at the University of Paris III-Sorbonne, in his study on interculturality, quotes that the English anthropologist B. Taylor was the first to use the word ‘culture’ in an ethnographic sense at the end of the 19th century. For him, culture is a complex system, which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and habits acquired by man as a member of society. As far as translation studies are concerned, it should be added that the attention paid to the intercultural dimension is ever-present in the contemplations of translators. In this regard, we cannot but mention Georges Mounin, one of the founding fathers of the discipline. In “*Les Belles Infidèles*”, Mounin speaks of the “third and last register,” which he calls the distance between the two civilizations. He then develops his ideas, noting that the translation will have to overcome the “color of civilization.” (Mounin 1995:69). This is exactly what we now call interculturality. As early as 1972, Ladmiral stressed that the cultural component should never be ignored by translators. Ladmiral puts forth the idea that one does not simply translate from a source language into a target language, but from one culture into another. Therefore, it is important to

compare the target culture with the source one (Ladmiral and Lipiansky 1995:127). Referring to Ladmiral's observation and drawing on Georges Mounin's studies, we shall attempt to show that literature, rightfully regarded as one of the primary bases of intercultural communication, can also lead to an intercultural conflict. For this purpose, we will study and analyze the translation of Hrant Matevosyan's novel "Autumn Sun." Literature is an area where questions about interculturality are often discussed. Indeed, due to its universality and its relation to a specific culture, literature is one of the most efficient ways to understand people and the world. Literary text can be seen as an intermediary between two cultures. Thus, literary text can constitute a means of access to social codes and cultural models, since, whatever its language of expression, it often contains a representation of the world, values shared between two cultures. Moreover, based on the idea that language is a system of signs with a cultural charge, the translation of literary works, which is also a 'meeting point' for languages and cultures, is undoubtedly a means of communication and a real source for enriching both cultures. In his book "Les Fondements sociolinguistiques de la traduction" Maurice Pergnier states that translation "is a mode of communication that is both interlinguistic and intercultural, which contributes [...] to the knowledge of the world that it makes accessible", and that its "objective is to broaden and enrich the vision of the world that one has of the other; it is transmission of knowledge and culture; it is a passage to the outside world and an act of exchange and communication" (Pergnier 1993:15).

Indeed, by bringing two languages into contact and contributing to the establishment of equality between languages and cultures, translation becomes a vector of interlinguistic and intercultural mediation.

Within the scope of this study we shall try to demonstrate that literature, more specifically the style of the author, the national mentality can cause intercultural 'conflicts.' The abovementioned concerns the works by Hrant Matevosyan - a talented writer, rightfully appreciated both during his lifetime and after his death. We have chosen Matevosyan's work for our research as Matevosyan's language, style of writing are very special. He writes the way he speaks, he speaks the way he writes. Now let us analyze his novel "Autumn Sun" and its French translation, focusing on the extracts where we will be able to examine these cross-cultural conflicts. These are the blessings and curses that the main characters use in their everyday lives, which form a 'folk' language. The main plot is woven around one of the main characters - Aghun, a peasant woman, married at a very young age, without loving, just on the demand of her stepmother. This marriage changes the young girl's life, who, as any young girl, dreams of love, a happy marital life quite different from her own. Hrant Matevosyan presents the drama of a village in Armenia - Tsemakut. Aghun's son marries a city girl and starts living in the city. The mother is against it, but life determines our fate. Throughout the novel Aghun prepares for a visit to her son's house. She takes with her a lot of provisions, sheets for her son made with her own hands. She calls her neighbor and her mother-in-law so that they can see her belongings. She is proud of that, because it is the result of her relentless work and suffering. This novel is very colorful with regard to the images portrayed which reveal the habits of the people living in this region. The subject is divided into smaller themes, each of them first of all revealing the hardships that people living in the remote and isolated regions have to go through.

Noteworthy is the image of Aghun. She has had many bitter days, a few happy days, but she wants to fight and it highlights her hard work. Along the way, she recalls the past, which is a chain of great sufferings and small joys. All the characters in the novel are people with their problems, their painful memories, their dreams and, above all, their future expectations. The author has created the characters with a unique density of colors: Aghun, Simon, mother-in-law, Sero, Armenak, Abel and others. Hrant Matevosyan's writing style is characterized by the use of the local dialect, the spoken language, and many other linguistic devices. The fact that the language in the novel is not homogeneous makes its translation rather difficult. This is where the intercultural conflict becomes apparent. It is difficult to link Matevosyan's writing style to any contemporary movement. It is primarily an individual style that did not exist before him. It is a world of its own, a style in itself, epic and realistic at the same time. In its irony, it borders on cruelty, in its melancholy, it borders on sentimentality. Being the bearers of different 'cultures,' in the narrow sense of the term, the characters created by Matevosyan use many curses and blessings. For example:

- Հիմի՛ չե՞ս գալիս, - ծիծաղեց Աղունը: Միմունը նայեց նրան, գլուխը շրջեց մյուս կողմի վրա ու թքեց: Բայց կարծես թե դեռ նայում էր Աղունին, որովհետեւ հովարը նայում էր Աղունի կողմը:

-Վեր կաց արի,- կանչեց Աղունը,- քեզ համար մի հատ ինքնահոս գրիչ եմ առնելու:

- Հենց սալրես, ոսղ եղիր՝ աչքս քեզ չտեսնի:

-Բա ձեր կովերն ո՞վ կկթի: (Matevosyan 2005:564)

Let's have a look at the French translation:

-Alors, cria-t-elle, tu ne viens pas ?

Il détourna la tête mais on aurait pu croire qu'il regardait encore sa femme : la visière se trouvait dans la direction de celle-ci.

-Allez, insista-t-elle, lève-toi et viens. Je te rapporterai un stylo.

- *Le diable emporte celui qui me fera voir ta tête ! Fous le camp !*

-Ah oui ? Et qui est-ce qui va traire les vaches, c'est toi ? (Matevosyan 1994:364)

In Matevosyan's work irony is everywhere. The term 'սալրես' is used to express appreciation like the blessing 'may you live long,' if translated literally. But Matevosyan's text is full of surprises. The Armenian reader feels a touch of irony in this word without difficulty. The same is true for the previous sentence where it refers to the promise to buy a pen. In the French version the translator was comfortable with not translating it, yet, he had to, because the presence of the term serves two functions: first, it is an ironic response to Aghun's irony, second, it softens the rest of the sentence, which sounds like an insult. The curse in Matevosyan's text is implicit (literally meaning 'let my eyes not see you'), in the French text the translator gives the classic version 'diable emporte celui qui me fera voir ta tête,' a version that makes the curse explicit, while the author has avoided this explicitness, precisely because it is a dialogue between husband and wife. Irony is just implied here and not explicitly

expressed. In this case, too, we see that it should not be merely translated from one language into another, but from one culture into another. Let us consider another example, but before proceeding to it, it should be noted that a curse in itself is only a punishing trick, and no matter how cruel it is, it is only at the level of words. Sargis Harutyunyan in his book “Curses and Blessings in Armenian Philology” says: “If the speaker’s action is malicious, then the speaker’s psychological response receives an external signal accordingly, the oral expression of which is a curse. It remains a psychological reality” (Harutyunyan 1975). Hrant Matevosyan is familiar with this description. These characters are all bearers of national mentality, hence, the difficulty of translating the novel.

- Բա ինչու՞ ես դու լաց լինում:

Ես իրավունք ունեմ: Քո լավ հորեղբայր Ադամը թեւիցս բռնեց ու հունվարին դուրս գցեց՝ «գնա, դու ես տան համար չես». քո տատ Արուսը ամեն օր արյուն-արտասուք էր թափել տալիս, քո պապ Աբելը, *խո՛ր՛ գնա*, հանդից գալիս էր ու՝ «դեռ էստեղ ե՛ս», քնից վեր էր կենում ու՝ «դեռ էստեղ ե՛ս. *շահ էրես ունես, շահ*». Իսկ քո էդ լավ հերը բերանը ծուռ կանգնած էր մոտները: (Matevosyan 2005:486)

Let's have a look at the French translation:

-Alors, pourquoi tu pleures, toi?

-C'est pas les raisons de pleurer qui me manquent. En plein mois de janvier, ton bon oncle Adam m'a prise par le bras et m'a mise dehors en me disant que je n'étais pas faite pour leur maison. Ta grand-mère Arousse me faisait pleurer tous les jours des larmes de sang. Ton grand-père Abel, lui, *le diable l'emporte* ! Quand il rentrait des champs, il me disait : «T'es encore là, toi ?» Quand il se réveillait : «T'es encore là, toi, avec *ta tête de chienne* ?» Et pendant ce temps-là, ton bon père, lui, il restait là la bouche ouverte sans rien dire. (Matevosyan 1994:275)

In this example it is truly a curse, which concerns the man who is not alive, but his memory is so unpleasant to Aghun, that she cannot recall him without cursing him. Already a ‘successful’ woman, who was able to create her family possessions out of nothing, she can take revenge for her wasted youth. But since she has a gentle heart, she takes her revenge with words. Finally, she adds:

Հողի տակ հանգիստ չունենա քո պապ Իշխան:

Que ton grand-père se retourne dans sa tombe.

What we observed in the translation of curses is the fact that while in the Armenian language several forms of curses are used, they are translated into the French language as ‘devil’:

Պատավը հիմա ուժը տվել էր ոտքին. Հովտի տերտերը ասել էր՝ «ամոթ է, այ կնիկ, ապրում են՝ թող խաղաղ ապրեն»: Փեշերը քշտած՝ պառավն իրեն խփել էր Դսեղի տերտերին, Կիրովականի տերտերին: Տերտերոց լինես, նանի ջա՛ն:

Գիր անել էր տալիս, գելերոց լինես: (Matevosyan 2005:501)

Let's have a look at the French translation:

Maintenant, la vieille avait décidé d'employer les grands moyens. Le terter de Hovit lui avait dit:

-C'est scandaleux, tout ça ! Ils vivent, laisse-les vivre en paix. Alors, elle était allée trouver celui de Dsegh, et puis celui de Kirovakan. Que tes curés t'étouffent, la vieille ! Elle faisait jeter des sorts. Le diable t'emporte! (Matevosyan 1994:294)

‘Գելորոց լինել’ is an Armenian expression which means to fall prey to wolves. ‘Գիր անել էր տալիս’ means to cast an evil spell, which one casts on someone with the intention of harming them. The consequences of a bad spell range from a simple psychological disturbance or stress, to an illness and physical suffering and sometimes even death. So Aghun's curse is the logical continuation of the actions of her mother-in-law. The word ‘տերտեր’ is translated into French as ‘prêtre.’ By analogy of the curse ‘գելորոց լինել,’ Aghun makes up her own curse ‘տերտերոց լինես,’ referring to the fact that on the day of the funeral the priest reads a prayer for the deceased. In the French version it is always the devil who comes to help. Here, too, we have the problem of a ‘cultural conflict’. For each situation Matevosyan and his characters use a specific language, while French offers a single solution only. Here we can see the loss of folklore, loss of a vernacular language that color the work. The translator has translated the expression ‘տերտերոց լինես’ as ‘your priests are choking you.’ As mere translation, this version might be acceptable, yet it contradicts the Armenian mindset making it a culturally improper rendition. For Armenians, priests and religion are notions that are linked to positive actions. A priest, for Armenians, cannot strangle anyone.

In the following example this difference is more explicit. Matevosyan introduces us to the typical Armenian village with its folklore and peculiar language. French gives us rather a poor rendition. In this example the peculiarity of Matevosyan's writing style is totally lost. We only discern a play of words that is peculiar to his style:

-Ախչի, դու հիմար ես: Ախչի, տո հարսիդ հերն էլ թաղեմ, տղիդ հերն էլ անիծեմ, ախչի, դու էս տունը սրբած տանում ես ու ս համար, - դեպի դռները գնաց Արուսը: (Matevosyan 2005:518)

The French version:

Tu es vraiment bête, tu sais. Que le diable l'enlève, ta bru, et ton fils avec ! Tu vides ta maison pour qui et pour qui fit-elle en se préparant à sortir. (Matevosyan 1994:313)

The form ‘ախչի’ is widely used in Armenian, especially in rural areas. Once again, the translator was fine with not translating this informal term of address, and we are faced with a fact which enables us to see that very often problems occurring during the translation process result from cultural differences. Since we are at the crossroads of

two cultures, we easily notice that the French version presents the work without the charm of Matevosyan's writing style. In the examples cited we can easily find the cultural difference. In Armenian, the characters talk using curses that are peculiar to the 'folk register,' and in each case the translator has chosen an expression with the component 'devil,' whereas the Armenian versions have no relation to that word. Far from giving an appreciation of the translation, we want to note that it is precisely the intercultural conflict that 'disturbs' the translator. In the Armenian version the curse is uttered as follows, if translated literally: 'may I bury the father of your daughter-in-law and the father of your son.' What does the French version tell us? 'Let the devil take away your daughter-in-law and your son with her.' For Armenians, children are sacred, as is religion. No one will ever dare curse a child in front of his mother, especially in an episode where it is only a simple dialogue between neighbors. Saying that, we want to say that one must be very careful when translating curses, especially in Matevosyan's works, where these curses very often weave the folk image.

Let's take a look at another example:

-Մի հատ թռիր մարգանք արա՛ տեսնեմ,-կանչեց Աղունը
-Քո լեզվիդ տերը մեռնի, քո լեզվիդ, - քրթմնջաց Միմունը, հեռացավ պտտածո-
ղից, չիմացավ ինչ անի, թշնամանքով նայեց պտտածողին և սրտնեղած թքեց:
Գյուղամեջ չկա, ամոթ չկա»: (Մաթեւոսյան 2005:556)

The French translation reads as follows:

-*Tu ne pourrais pas te taire un peu ?* Grogna-t-il puis, ne sachant quelle contenance prendre, il s'éloigna de la barre fixe en lui jetant un regard mauvais, cracha et ajouta d'un air dégoûté: Au milieu du village ! La honte! (Matevosyan 1994:356)

The expression 'լեզվիդ տերը մեռնի' is a type of a curse, an expression that is widely used in the spoken language, especially in villages. Literally it means 'may the owner of your language die.' We notice that in this case the curse is not direct, the speaker does not wish for your death for two reasons, in fact. Firstly, the husband does not really want his wife to die, secondly, the author reminds us of Aghun's transformation. This woman who did not speak in front of her husband, who was ashamed to ask him for anything for herself, has become a woman with a very 'long tongue' as Armenians put it, who now says whatever comes to her mind. She has become completely different and her husband, as in the past, could not do anything he wanted in his parents' presence. Now he cannot do anything he wants in his wife's presence either. There is only one solution left for her: the curse. The French version does not have the equivalent of the expression. The translator has translated the curse with the verb 'se taire,' a completely neutral verb, far from the register of the language used by Matevosyan. The French reader does not feel the Armenian environment, the plain speech of ordinary people. And this is not a minor error in translation, it causes the author's individual style to get lost.

The next phenomenon that attracts attention is that Aghun does not respond to the curse with a curse, which might be more logical, but she curses herself by using the same terms as her husband - a wordplay, no doubt. Now let us look at Aghun's words:

Անտեր մնա իմ լեզուն, որ ձեզ էդպես խանգարում է (Matevosyan 2005:500) (literally 'let my tongue remain without an owner') - Faut que je me l'arrache, si elle te gêne tant.

We notice that in this dialogue the author uses wordplay, (with the same terms the speakers utter a curse - one to his wife, the other to themselves). It is a deliberate trick on part of the author to give a complete picture of the village and Armenian folklore. Unfortunately, for the French reader these nuances are completely absent. Having said that, we do not intend to imply that the translation is bad, but we simply want to show that the translation is rather a difficult task and that it is not enough to know the language of the original only to be able to translate it. It is equally as important to know the original culture and to be able to 'translate' the culture, in this particular case.

Let's look at another example:

Ապրուստի գլուխն էլ հողեմ, կարևորը մարդու առողջությունն է ու ուրախությունը: (Matevosyan 2005:507) (literally, 'I put the head of the living into the ground, the important thing is my husband's health and happiness') – au diable la maison, le principal c'est d'être heureux et en bonne santé.

Another important manifestation of an Armenian woman's mentality is neutralized in the French translation:

Աղունը Վանքեր հորանց էր գնացել, Վանքերի տերտերն ասաց՝ «ամուսինդ քեզ լավ չի վերաբերվում, տանդ վրա չար աչք կա, ուզում են բախտդ կապել՝ ամուսինդ լավ տղա է, միաբան եղեք՝ չարը կխափանվի»: (Matevosyan 2005:494)

The French version:

Aghun était allée chez les siens à Vanker, et là le terter lui avait dit :
-Si ton mari se conduit mal avec toi, ma fille, c'est qu'il y a le mauvais œil sur ta maison et qu'on te veut du mal. Mais ce n'est pas un mauvais garçon, restez unis et vous triompherez du mal.

The word 'տերտեր' was not translated, while the expression 'le mauvais œil sur ta maison' is a word-for-word translation, which is strange for a francophone reader. Also, in French there is no such expression as 'չարը կխափանվի.' The proposed translation for this expression is 'vous triompherez du mal.'

It is true that, if linguistic translation is a considerable contribution to the understanding between people and a powerful factor in the exchange of ideas, yet, a full transfer of meaning is unlikely to take place. There are always some nuances that cannot be accurately imparted to the target reader. This hinders the full understanding of what is expressed in a language other than our own, since every language bears a

cultural aspect. Generally, while translating a literary work, the meaning is almost always somewhat lost. It is especially true for this kind of literary pieces. For a foreigner the situation in which the characters find themselves might be incomprehensible. There are expressions that are used by people of different mentalities.

‘Գետիինը մտնէս’ is another curse that has no equivalent in French. For a native French speaker the literal translation of this expression will make no sense. It has been translated as ‘maudit sois-tu.’ Another exemple:

Ճիշտ է, արմատահան լինի իմ լեզուն: (Matevosyan 2005:494)

In French:

C'est vrai, ma langue me perdra.

The literal translation of this expression would be ‘արմատահան լինի դրա լեզուն’ - ‘que le diable lui arrache la langue!.’

Օ՛ֆ-օ՛ֆ, ծաղկած ծառին զնասս՝ կչորանա: Je veux dire que toi, si tu t'approches d'un arbre en fleur, aussitôt, il y a plus de fleurs.

-Դեռ նա՛ դ եղիր, քո դեսն ուղարկողի հերն անիծեմ: (Matevosyan 2005:551)

In French:

Le diable emporte celui qui me fera voir ta tête!

This translation is not the equivalent of the Armenian curse. The translator simply tried to paraphrase.

As mentioned above, folklore, irony and wit are present in all of Matevosyan's works. It is the author's style, it is the everyday life of his characters, who are not just characters in the book, but ordinary people, especially in terms of the language they use. We have also mentioned that for each situation the Armenian language, Matevosyan's language, to be more specific, finds a curse, while the French language only tries to somehow convey the meaning. If we present this in figures, then we will have the following picture:

For 6 Armenian curse there is only one French equivalent (que le diables t'emporte, les emporte, l'emporte etc.).

Exemples of curses in Armenian with their literal translation in French:

1. աչքս քեզ չտեսնի – que mon œil ne te voie pas;
2. պսպ Աբելը, խո ր զնա – qu'il va le plus profond possible;
3. գելերոց լինես – que tu deviennes proie des loups;
4. հարսիդ հերն էլ թաղեմ – que j'enterre le père de ta bru;
5. տղիդ հերն էլ անիծեմ – que je maudisse le père de ton fils;
6. քո լեզվիդ տերը մեռնի, քո լեզվիդ – que le propriétaire de ta langue soit mort.

Another peculiarity we noticed in our study is the translation of blessings. As in the case of curses, here as well we can ascribe those translation problems more to the cultural than linguistic aspects of the work. Let's consider some examples:

Միմոնիս կոնէրին մատաղ (Matevosyan 2005:502) - que les mains de Simon soient bénies.

In the Armenian version the character talks about Simon - her son, and as a sign of great love she says: ‘Միմոնիս կոնէրին մատաղ.’ Her love for Simon is so great that she is willing to sacrifice herself for him. It has been translated into French as ‘may Simon's hands be blessed.’ Linguistically we agree that the translation corresponds to the original, but culturally we can see a big difference from the original. In the original Aghun is ready to sacrifice herself, whereas in the French version she asks for God's blessing. There is no sacrifice, there is a call to God. This problem can be seen in almost all examples. Armenians, by their mentality, are ready to sacrifice themselves for a loved one, for a child, a parent, whereas the French are likely to ask God for salvation, yet not at the expense of sacrifice. Let us provide some more examples to prove the abovementioned:

Սամվէլիս ցա՛վը տանեմ: (Matevosyan 2005:484)

In French:

Samvel, Dieu ait ton âme.

Մեռնեմ ճարտար լեզվիդ: (Matevosyan 2005:484)

In French:

Dieu la bénisse, ta langue.

There are expressions that do not have their equivalent in the French language, for example: ‘Ախպերը-ախպոր ցավը տանեմ’ – ‘Ton frère? Ah, il fait tout bien, ton frère’; ‘Սամվէլիս ցավը տանեմ’ – ‘Dieu ait son âme’; ‘Մեռնեմ ճարտար լեզվիդ’ – ‘Que Dieu la Bénisse ta langue.’ Only Armenians can understand the meaning of these expressions. The same is true for oaths such as ‘Նրա կանաչ սրերը’ – ‘Je te le jure sur sa tete.’ It shows the unique value of these phrases, which are untranslatable.

There are also sentences that introduce certain emotions: ‘Կուրսնամ ես’ – ‘Que mes yeux perdent la lumière.’

Through these examples it became evident that the translation of cultural elements is a great problem for translators. We also noted, as Umberto Eco says, that we do not translate the same thing, but almost the same thing, and this ‘almost’ is most often about the cultures.

3. Conclusion

When translation takes place between two different cultures, an inevitable conflict for influence and power may emerge between them. The analysis of the curses and blessings in Hrant Matevosyan's novel "Autumn Sun" reveals that the errors occurring during the translation process are more cultural than linguistic by nature. So, the translator should not only have a solid grasp on the language pair he is working with but also the cultural aspects of the work he is dealing with.

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