Dealing with Cultural Issues in Translating Blog Columns by Jeff Klima
Abstract

The aim of this essay is to identify and discuss possible solutions to problems regarding the translation of certain cultural references in blog columns by the American author Jeff Klima. More specifically, these cultural references are general cultural aspects, swear words and references to people. General cultural aspects include references to historical events, religious festivities, publications, cultural stereotypes and culturally based idioms. I use Vinay and Darbelnet’s strategies of direct and oblique translation, as well as Nida’s concepts of formal and dynamic equivalence. I also use Newmark’s strategies of semantic versus communicative translation, and Ingo’s adaption strategy. I find that there is no universal solution applicable to all types of culturally related issues in translation, but that every case is unique and requires a unique solution. What can be said, however, is that semantic translations and word-for-word translations are rarely applicable when it comes to cultural issues. True for all issues, however, is that the translator needs to be perfectly clear on what the author is saying and who the receiver, or target reader, is in order to begin to explore which strategy is best to use.

Keywords: adaption, adaptation, cultural idioms, cultural references, direct translation, famous people, oblique translation, pop culture, stereotypes, swear words.
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1 Introduction

The possibilities of sharing information with people in other countries all over the world are now endless. Sharing stories from your own corner of the world with somebody on the other side of the globe is now as simple as copying and pasting a link onto Facebook, Twitter or a blog. However, where there is a language barrier, the contents of that information need to be translated from the source language into the target language.

Additionally, the enormous expansion of blogs over the last few years has contributed to the spreading of information now being something that anybody with a keyboard and an internet connection can participate in. Sharing news is no longer a newspaper’s undisputable prerogative, and the relative ease with which information can now be spread has been a factor in changing the norms of formality for published pieces. For a translator, this poses issues regarding the adaptation of a text to the target audience. These days, authors no longer have to be too concerned with who their target reader is and can feel more free to publish in the style they choose themselves rather than using cookie-cutter standards.

Subsequently, a wider range of expression creates problems for a translator to solve which lie beyond purely lexical difficulties. Though sharing a link is done with the click of a button, sharing an understanding of the author’s cultural context, references and expressions is slightly more complicated. For the translator, making sure that that understanding between the author and the reader does not get lost in translation is of the utmost importance.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this essay is to identify and discuss possible solutions to problems regarding the translation of certain cultural references in blog columns by Jeff Klima. More specifically, these cultural references are general cultural aspects, swear words and references to people.
1.2 Material and Method

As I have already mentioned, I have chosen to translate blog columns by Jeff Klima, published on the Huffington Post website in order to illustrate culturally related problems in the translation. Klima’s work is not as 'polished' as one might expect from published work, which is most likely partly due to the format of the blog column in which it has been posted. Jeff Klima’s blog is posted on the American The Huffington Post website. The Huffington Post is a news web site founded in 2005 (The Huffington Post 2011) and has rapidly become a media force with which to be reckoned. Jeff Klima’s entries on the website are something between blog posts and newspaper style columns; in length more like columns but stylistically more suited for a blog or another non-print format.

Considering the readily available format in which Klima’s blog is published, it might be conceived that the readers of the blog are quite diverse. Regarding his presumed readers, this is what Jeff Klima himself thinks:

The Huffington Post reader in my mind, particularly of the "Books" section, is an educated late 20s/early 30s mostly female, predominantly American crowd. […]

Ideally, I write for two diverse groups […] people who are overly critical and read to take me down… they miss the levity and humor of the writing and focus on the minutiae of the facts. They, I imagine, are over 30, bitter, failed writer types […] So I delight in being a thorn in their side in the sense that I teach them little “of value.”

The other person I feel I write for is […] the aforementioned educated female crowd. (Klima, personal e-mail, 27 April 2011.)

A very important aspect regarding target readers is Klima’s point about writing both for people who appreciate his columns and read them for the sake of humour, and for his critics. His wish to be provocative adds an extra dimension to the translation, as the translator has to avoid making the translation too mild in relation to the source text. His remark about prioritizing provocation over factual accuracy is important to bear in mind. If the purpose of the text is to be both entertaining and provocative, the translation of it cannot be allowed to come out flat. If the overall purpose of the source text, however, was to accurately share facts
and educate the readers, a certain flatness in the target text might have been acceptable, or would at least not have been a hindrance in conveying the message of the source text.

The context in which the translation will be published is then naturally crucial to my translation. This gives me some idea of how much freedom I can allow myself as a translator when facing especially complicated culture related problems. In translating these texts, I imagine that the Huffington Post is about to be launched in Sweden, with some content translated from English in order to create a sense of what the website features. Another scenario one might consider is that the columns would be gathered in a book and translated for the Swedish market.

Identifying my ideal target reader is key in order to make informed decisions about which routes to go when addressing these issues (Ingo 2007:126-127). Whether or not the translation is done with a view to launching the Huffington Post in Swedish or a collection of Klima’s columns being released in Sweden, the target reader remains the same, and I keep this person in mind when making my translation choices. I imagine somebody fitting Klima’s description, a twenty- or thirtysomething person, somewhat well educated, with an interest in current events and pop culture.

1.3 Theoretical Background

Considering that this essay deals with difficulties in translating cultural references, it is necessary to first define what constitutes a cultural reference. In her article “Cultural Implications for Translation”, Kate James states that the cultural context of any text derives from linguistics as well as from the source culture’s history and ideologies. It is the task of the translator to identify the culturally specific markings on any text and also to make the decision about what needs and ought to be incorporated into the translation (James 2002). In other words, bearing the source culture in mind, the translator has to identify the references, terms and expressions that for cultural reasons cannot simply be transferred or literally translated from the source language to the target language. The term equivalence is key, including the various types of cultural references dealt with in this paper. Eugene Nida problematized the nature of the word ‘meaning’, and distinguished between linguistic meaning, referential meaning, and emotive meaning (Munday 2001:38). For instance, idiomatic expressions in the source language often find equivalent idioms in the target language without necessarily being
literal translations. The English expression *a piece of cake*, for example, can be satisfactorily translated into *lätt som en plätt* in Swedish. However, there are expressions which through popular usage can be said to hold idiom status. These expressions are more often than not based in culture; in a historic event, a famous person et c. These culture based idioms often lack equivalent target language expressions, due to cultural differences. The expression *in like Flynn*, for instance, lacks an equivalent Swedish expression. In English, the term means “To be quickly and/or emphatically successful, usually in a sexual or romantic context” and references actor Errol Flynn, famous for his romantic conquests both on and off the screen (*In Like Flynn* 2010). Rune Ingo states that the essential part regarding idioms is for the translator during analysis to have a clear idea of what the author of the text means to say using the expression (Ingo 1991:210). Ingo goes on to say that the translator needs to figure out the stylistic level of the idiom and the connotations associated with that particular expression. A clear idea of what the author says and means, is crucial in order to tackle the idiom or expression in translation (Ingo 1991:210-211).

Ingo’s advice in mind, when encountering an expression such as *in like Flynn*, the translator needs to be sure of why the author has chosen to use the expression. Does the author just want to describe somebody who is romantically successful, or could Errol Flynn himself be of importance in the text? The answer to this question will give a clear indication of how to deal with the expression in the target language, given that the target readers will be differently equipped culturally than the source text readers. A literal translation, i.e. *inne som Flynn*, would not mean anything to the target reader, given that expression does not exist. Errol Flynn might also well be famous in the target culture, but chances are that there are other people who would more easily spring to mind when considering famous Casanovas. Subsequently, the text needs to be adapted to suit the target reader (Ingo 2007:126-127). What in the translation needs to be adapted for the target readership is important not only when dealing with culturally idiomatic expressions, but also when encountering remarks made for comedic effect or references to celebrities, religious festivities or current or historic events.

Peter Newmark introduced the terms *semantic* and *communicative translation* in order to address the issue of the ever present gap between source and target language. Put briefly, semantic translation means prioritizing semantic and syntactic accuracy over the message and effect of the text. The effect of the text is what communicative translation prioritizes.
Newmark also states that in cases where “equivalent effect is secured, the literal word-for-word translation is not only the best, it is the only valid method of translation” (Munday 2001:44). In other words, semantic equivalence between source and target language is the ultimate translation, but not at the expense of the overall effect.

Newmark’s idea of semantic versus communicative translation shares features with Nida’s concept of formal and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence focuses on the structure of the source text and the message being conveyed in form as close to the source text as possible. A translation of this kind will often include reminders of the translator’s presence, in the form of explanatory remarks. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, shifts the focus to the target context, allowing certain alterations to be made in order to ensure that the message of the text will basically be the same to the target readers as the original text was to the original readers in the source language. Nida also stresses that where content and form do not correspond; a corresponding meaning needs to be chosen over a corresponding style (Munday 2001:41-42). Where there is a translation problem due to source and target cultures differing, the translator then needs to choose between staying more true to the source or the target culture.

Vinay and Darbelnet, following their comparative stylistic analysis of French and English, came up with two different translation strategies, direct and oblique translation. Direct translation means that the translator can choose between borrowing, calque and literal translation. Borrowing means simply using the same word in the target text as in the source text, for instance the German word sauerkraut. Calque can be said to be borrowing, only translated. For example, Compliments de la Saison in French becomes Compliments of the Season in English. Literal translation means translating word-for-word, which they state as the most common translation strategy. It is also the one recommended unless, for instance, a literally translated word or expression means something different or nothing at all in the target text, is structurally impossible, or a corresponding expression does not exist in the target language. According to Vinay and Darbelnet, where a literal translation cannot be used, the translator must use oblique translation. Among the procedures that this strategy consists of is equivalence and adaptation. Equivalence is mainly used in exchanging one idiom for another with the same meaning, whereas adaptation gives the translator the freedom to change a cultural reference from the source text to the target text. For instance, a reference to baseball in an American text could be changed into a reference to ice hockey in a Swedish target text to maintain the flow of a text (Munday 2001:56-58).
2 Analysis

As mentioned in section 1.1, this essay aims to identify and discuss solutions to translation problems caused by certain cultural references. They will each be illustrated below through examples from the source text and my idea for a translation solution suited to my target reader.

2.1 General Cultural Aspects

Issues that arise from a difference in cultural context between the source and the target language can come in many different forms. For example, a reference to a religious celebration such as the bat or bar mitzvah could be self-explanatory in the source language, but, depending on the context, might need some work in the translation, as in (1).

(1) Ask Justin Guarini, the first season runner up on American Idol. As the taping of that first season wound down, I'm sure he was thinking, "I've made it--I've grasped the gold horseshoe of success, [...] but the point is, nowadays, I bet you could get him to sing at your niece's bat mitzvah.

Fråga Justin Guarini, som kom tvåa i första säsongen av American Idol. När den där första säsongen led mot sitt slut är jag säker på att han tänkte ”Jag har lyckats, jag har grabbat tag i framgångens gyllene hästsko,[...]men poängen är att nu för tiden skulle man säkert kunna anlita honom för vilken fest som helst.

Given the substantially larger Jewish population in America compared to Sweden, the bat and bar mitzvah is surely a much more well known tradition in the source culture than in the target culture. Had the original sentence been, for example, I am going to my niece’s bat mitzvah, semantic translation would have to have been chosen over communicative translation, and to use bat mitzvah in the target text would have been the only option. In this instance, however, it is not the bat mitzvah itself that is of importance to the message, but rather the fact that Justin Guarini, once of television fame, is no longer enjoying star status and will most likely perform at any event at which you pay him to appear. The equivalence needs to be dynamic
rather than formal, as the target culture needs to be the focal point for the translator. Thus, using a more general expression like fest does not cause anything substantial to be lost in translation, but conveys the message that Justin Guarini is a beggar who cannot afford to be a chooser. Additionally, choosing to use anlita honom instead of the literal translation for sing, sjunga, adds to the message of Guarini these days being a performer who is desperate enough for work to be hired by anyone, and his status no longer outdoes anybody else’s. Had the translation been nuförtiden skulle man säkert kunna få honom att sjunga på vilken fest som helst, it might have given the impression that when Guarini is a guest at the party who might be persuaded to sing on occasion, regardless of status. However, using the verb anlita shows that Guarini is at the party as a performer, there for the sole purpose of entertaining the guests. This means that you, the reader, are now effectively his employer and therefore higher in status than he is.

Another issue for the translator regarding cultural aspects is how to deal with references to well known publications that clearly represent something in the source culture which they do not in the target culture.

(2) "Who says that Merriam Webster is correct?"

Merriam-Webster is a dictionary for the English language. The joke in the sentence is a play on Merriam-Webster being authoritative in the area of spelling and semantics. While a Swedish target reader may have come across it while researching English words, it is not a sufficiently well known dictionary to warrant simple transference. For the joke to work in the translation, Merriam-Webster needs to be either (a) explained in the text for formal equivalence through an addition, (b) adapted to the target culture by being substituted for a Swedish equivalent, such as SAOL, or (c) adapted to the target culture by being exchanged for a descriptive term. Using the addition strategy, the translation would be Vem säger att ordboken Merriam-Webster har rätt? This is not a good solution, as it is rather disruptive to the rhythm of the text. Furthermore, there is really no need to keep Merriam-Webster as the reference in the translation. Exploring the substitution option, the translator compromises the source text by taking the source culture out of the text completely and actually replacing it with the target culture. This solution is inappropriate in a case like (2), where the source culture is such a large part of the message of the source text. That leaves the option of using a
descriptive term, such as simply *ordboken*. This solution enables an explanation of the source term while still maintaining the flow of the sentence, and the message of the joke.

More or less the same issue is faced in the following example (3) as well:

(3) Though dislike of your opponent may last decades, the actual feud may only last as long as the print cycle of an issue of *Vanity Fair*. Anything longer and you risk alienating people following the feud in the waiting room at the dentist’s office.

In (3) as in (2), the issue at hand is that the publication mentioned in the source text is representative of something in the source culture, while not being representative of anything at all in the target culture. It would certainly be possible to substitute the title *Vanity Fair* for something relatively equal in Sweden, but the point of this passage is not to do with the publication itself, but to emphasize that as a rule, people’s attention spans are short, and it is likely that casual feud followers will not be feud followers for very long at all. For that reason, using a descriptive term like *månadsmagasin* is the best way to go, for the same reason as *ordboken* is the best choice in dealing with (2): it gets the message across without confusing the readers with names of publications that they will probably know are nothing to do with America (as, for example, using *Tara* or another Swedish monthly magazine might).

Stereotypes also differ quite a lot between cultures, illustrated by (4):

(4) It won’t be long now before I mow my lawn in high socks while smoking a pipe.

Mowing the lawn in high socks while smoking a pipe is an American stereotype of an old man, which is what Klima is meaning to convey. Translating this literally would be confusing to a Swedish reader, to whom the stereotypical image of an old man is not necessarily a pipe-smoking, lawn-mowing, high sock-wearing person. Pipe smoking may work as imagery, but mowing the lawn and wearing high socks is not typically connected with old men in Swedish culture. However, a man wearing a cap while driving is a common image of an old man in
Sweden. A literal translation is not possible in this example, and for that reason, an oblique translation using equivalence (though with exchangeable imagery rather than idioms) is a good solution. Using the imagery of an old man driving while wearing a cap conveys the message of the source text about the aged version of the author. Moreover, it maintains a humorous tone in keeping with the source text.

Apart from imagery, culturally based idioms (as mentioned in section 1.2) are also not easily translatable. *Drinking the Kool-Aid* is an American expression implying that someone is being fooled by something or someone, or accepting a system of ideas without scrutiny (*Drink the Kool-Aid* 2005). In the following example (5), which makes up the title of one of the columns, the translator faces problems of an idiomatic nature as well as a reference to history.

(5) *Drinking the Literary Kool-Aid*  
*Att svälja litteraturens förgiftade saft*

This expression is a reference to the Jonestown Massacre, where Brian Jones convinced his entire band of followers to drink Kool-Aid, which he had prepared with poison. More than 900 people died as a result of this (Haney 2007). The event is well known in America, kept ever-current by the usage of this expression. The incident is likely to be slightly less well known in Sweden, and the expression itself lacks a Swedish counterpart. Swedish simply does not have a corresponding expression that ticks all the boxes warranted by the source text. A word-for-word translation, *Att dricka den litterära Kool-Aiden*, is unadvisable for several reasons: it is a very odd thing to say given that the expression does not exist, plus Kool-Aid is not commonly drunk in Sweden, and even if it was, drinking it would not be associated with anything bad. Following Rune Ingo’s imperative to be certain what the author wants to convey by using the expression, the translator would have to reach the conclusion that he means to say that something in the literary world is fooling a lot of people who are all unquestioning followers. For that reason, a translation of this expression has to be communicative rather than semantic, and the equivalence dynamic rather than formal. The word-for-word translation offered above also includes borrowing (of the Kool-Aid trademark), and as previously stated, it does not work as a translation. A direct translation is therefore not possible, and so the translation must be oblique. It has already been asserted that there is no corresponding idiom in Swedish, so the equivalence procedure does not work here. Thus, adaptation is the remaining alternative. By substituting *Kool-Aid* with *förgiftade saft*, the impression of something seemingly harmless actually being harmful is kept. Going by
presumed author’s intent, Klima does not mean to say anything specifically about the Jonestown massacre, but rather uses the expression to convey that people are being fooled. The result is a communicatively conceivable translation, where the historic reference has been forsaken for the sake of the overall message remaining as intact as possible.

Historic events that are more known (or, perhaps, remembered) locally than globally such as (5) is far from the only kind of historic event that might be troublesome to a translator. In (6) below, the subject refers to the period of slavery in American history, a period of time which is hardly less famous in the rest of the world than in America itself.

(6) Instead of Huckleberry Finn navigating the Mississippi with his Negro friend, Jim, you write it as Agent Huck Steel: Demon Puncher, aided by his stripper girlfriend, Trixii Delicious. What happened to his Negro friend Jim? Apparently African Americans didn't test well with the youth literary market.

The author chooses this wording to plant the image in the reader’s mind of a period of time in American history where slavery had not yet been abolished and a white boy was not likely to make friends with a black boy. Unlike (5), in (6) the historic reference is of real importance to the text. Though the word Negro is not generally acceptable in America, choosing this word in this context does not imply any derogatory views on the author’s part. It is merely a reference to the history of his own country. The closest literal translation would be sin/hans negervän Jim. However, this would not work at all, since using the word neger in Swedish does imply a prejudiced author. One way of dealing with this problem would be to eliminate the problematic word completely, and simply translate it into sin/hans vän Jim. However, this does not only require enough pre-existing knowledge on the reader’s part to know that there is a character called Jim in Huckleberry Finn, and that Jim was a black boy. It also goes against the author’s message and obscures his reference to that period of American history.

Furthermore, this solution creates new problems for the rest of the sentence as Klima goes on to say that the adventures of a demon hunter and his stripper girlfriend would be more appealing to the youth audience than the (at the time) unlikely friendship between a white and
a black boy. Consequently, the solution requires some kind of reference to Jim’s ethnic origin, but cannot be a word-for-word translation, since this would create values on the part of the author, which do not exist in the source text. *Sin/hans svarta vän Jim* thus seems like the best solution in order to describe Jim’s skin colour and the significance of this to the example that the author offers, but doing so without making the author a racist.

There are instances where a literal translation works well. Consider the following example:

(7) This is the literary equivalent of when Sandy came out at the end of the movie *Grease* all decked out in a tight black bodysuit and smoking and you thought, 'Damn, she changed her entire belief system just to please a man.' Well guess what, Mr. Wallace? (Jeff steps out in black skintight bodysuit, has cigarette, and is singing a bit off-key) I got chills... they're multiplyin'... and I'm losing control...

In this section, Klima talks about the moment in the movie *Grease* where Olivia Newton John’s character emerges after a rather dramatic makeover. Klima’s imagined rendition of this moment, complete with lyrics to the song featured in that movie scene, is used in the text to illustrate his changing his belief system in the same way that Sandy does in the movie. Keeping this section as it is would have to mean that the translator was sure that the Swedish target readers would be as familiar with both this scene and the lyrics to the song as any American reader. Considering that *Grease* is an iconic film in Sweden as well as in America, the translator ought to be able to be fairly confident that the reference will work in the target culture as well. Further considering that the target reader is in his or her twenties or thirties and has some knowledge or interest in pop culture, it is barely conceivable that this reference could be misunderstood. For that reason, no distinction needs to be made between the original reader and the target reader in this case and a literal translation is possible and advisable. Thus, Klima’s using the film’s final scenes to make a point about people changing their whole belief systems for the sake of one other person, is something that does not need to be changed in the translation.
2.2 Swear Words

Swear words and insults do not always have a natural literal counterpart in the target language. The following example (8) is particularly problematic given the nature of the insult.

(8) Perhaps a metaphor about the mythological two-faced God "Janus" might have been a more palate-friendly image than that of two mud-dusted hogs bumpin' uglies under the withering August sun, but to agree with that is a pledge to stop reading this column. I thought so, dirtbag.


Depending on the context, dirtbag could be translated into any number of Swedish words, such as äckel, as or skitstövel. However, the translation needs to be communicative rather than semantic. In the present context, äckel is far too harsh, as is not quite right semantically nor on the same insult level as dirtbag, and skitstövel would be contextually wrong. Klima is trying to convey a somewhat perverse fascination on the part of the reader who keeps on reading, almost as if the reader is a Peeping Tom, but he also does it in an intentionally humorous way. Jäkel is quite mild as an insult, and is also not misplaced with regard to the humorous aspect. By adding an adjective before jäkel the translator conveys the tone of the source text without having to find an exactly corresponding noun in the target language. This solution does constitute a slight digression from semantics, but it is a digression that is needed in order to communicate the humorous aspect.

The scales according to which prophanities are judged also differ from country to country. Example (9) further illustrates the problems caused by this:

(9) And where the hell's her penis? Och var fases är hennes penis?

In English, swear words concerning the body and bodily functions are considered worse than swear words with a blasphemous or religious content. For example, fuck and shit are generally
considered to be much more controversial than *hell* (Goldacre 2006). In Swedish, on the other hand, *helvete* is rather a strong word to use. Here, prophanities involving genitaliae are usually the worst prohanities you can use, followed by religiously associated swear words (Andersson 2004:79). For that reason, a semantic translation of this sentence is unsuitable and needs to be communicative in order to work properly with regard to the target reader. The expression needs to be softened to keep the tone, and a milder word like *fasen* is better to use.

In the following example, the opposite of (9) is true: downgrading the prophanity level in the translation too far would not work in trying to maintain the author’s tone.

(10) Now were this column strictly about my friend and mine's cock-centric whimsies *(damn that sounds gay)*

Om denna krönika nu enbart handlade om mina och min kompis kukcentriska påhitt *(fan vad det låter bögigt)*

Downgrading the translated Swedish swear word a few steps is far from catastrophic here but is nevertheless a somewhat inappropriate way to go. Klima’s using *damn* here is almost in passing, as if he catches himself thinking that the preceding sentence sounds gay. Given that the author gives the utterance the appearance of being un-edited in character, it is meant to sound spontaneous. Subsequently, the translator needs to honour the author’s intent in this example and cannot and needs not adapt the word to suit the target reader. However, the target reader does not suffer with this solution either. Going by spontaneous utterances, it seems far more likely that a Swedish person catching him/herself off guard would say *fan* than for instance *fasen*, or *fasiken*. Matching the mildness in the source text’s curse word could thus be seen as over-working the translation, compromising the integrity of the source text by removing some of the spontaneity of the utterance. For that reason, upgrading the swear word used in the translation (using *fan*) is more in keeping with the text, even though *fasen* is semantically more on par with the actual word *damn*.

**2.3 References to People**

There are plenty of celebrities who are famous the world over, such as superstar pop singers or world leaders. In the area of sports, however, a major celebrity in one country can be almost completely unknown in another, largely depending on the popularity of the sport in that particular country. This is a problem illustrated in the following example:
Both Bill Clinton and the Pope are easily recognizable people in Sweden as well as in America. Roger Clemens, however, is not as famous in the target culture. A Google search for Roger Clemens using only Swedish sites as search criterion gets very few results (Roger Clemens 2011). Being a baseball player, and baseball not being a widely popular sport in Sweden, he is certainly at a disadvantage compared to a former president and the Pope. His relevance in the quote above is not directly linked to his success as a baseball player, but to his being accused of using steroids and lying about it (Sheinin & Hsu 2010). Therefore, using adaptation and changing his name into that of a famous Swedish athlete accused of the same thing is one possible solution for a translator. However, these three are more than simply men who have been accused of some form of socially unaccepted or illegal behaviour, they are also men who have denied doing what they have been accused of. Considering the rest of the sentence, it is the denial of these three men that really links them. Bill Clinton’s categorically denying having had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky is common knowledge in Sweden, as is the Pope’s fervently denying that anything is wrong within the Catholic church. As a result, Roger Clemens is the odd one out in the target context. Exploring the adaptation option, Clemens’ name would ideally be substituted for that of somebody who has done the same thing as he has: used steroids, then denied it, then been found guilty of it. In order to stay as true to the source text as possible, this person would also ideally be a well-known male athlete. Swedish football goalkeeper Magnus Hedman, who denied both use of doping and hiring prostitutes but who was later found guilty of both of these things, fits the mold. However, using Magnus Hedman instead of Roger Clemens makes the text distinctly Swedish in a way that makes adaptation unsuitable. While Magnus Hedman will be more relatable to the target audience, his name in an otherwise American text will be disruptive and it compromises the source text completely. So in this example, the translation needs formal equivalence because the source culture is more important in this example than the target culture.

A different option would be to keep Roger Clemens as the reference while offering a brief introduction of him, for example dopingsfällda Roger Clemens. This solution is, however, not
perfect. Considering that his would be the only name explained, the inserted adjective in the text would be disruptive with regard to the source text and would only alert the reader to the fact that the text is in fact a translation of an original, adapted to suit the target reader. Furthermore, the adjective describes only Clemens’ crime and not his denial, setting him apart from the others. For that reason, a kind of borrowing by keeping the original name (despite it not necessarily being an easily understood reference) is a better solution in order to maintain the integrity of the source text, because in this case the source text needs to be prioritized above the target text. Moreover, the associations that Bill Clinton and the Pope create in this sentence make up enough of an indication of who Clemens might be, or at least of what sort of behaviour he might have been guilty of, to justify keeping the name.

(12) But every GoLF has rules, and those rules are as old and ironclad as Jack LaLanne’s balls. Men varje GoLF har regler, och de reglerna är lika stenhårda som fitnessgurun Jack LaLanne’s kulor.

Jack LaLanne is a famous fitness profile in America. He is, however, not as known in Sweden, and a Google search for Jack LaLanne turns up very few results on Swedish pages (Jack LaLanne 2011). As in the instance with Roger Clemens in (11), keeping the tone and the point of the sentence leaves the translator with a few different options. Keep the name as is and risk the reader not understanding the reference, or substitute the person with another person, more famous in the target culture. The closest Sweden has to an equivalent of Jack LaLanne is ‘80s workout queen Susanne Lanefelt. Considering she is famous for her highly toned gluteal muscles, the word balls could also be substituted for skinkor without losing any of the source text message. As in (11), however, adapting the text by putting Susanne Lanefelt in it, again makes it distinctly Swedish and is unsuitable for the same reasons as it would be to mention Magnus Hedman instead of Roger Clemens.

Unlike (11), in (12) Jack LaLanne is mentioned on his own, and is not listed with anyone else. For that reason, going for formal equivalence by using an explanatory word is conceivable and perhaps even advisable in (12). The translator still risks the target reader not getting the reference, but the reader has at least been given a clue to the reason for Jack LaLanne’s presence in the text.
Another instance where a person is referenced where the reference might not be understood is given in (13):

(13) What I am trying to teach you through my column is that we can ALL be intellectuals. Organized religion has been doing this for years... even Jenny McCarthy seems to have figured this out, though she foolishly attacks science.

Jenny McCarthy is a former Playboy model who in recent years has campaigned to raise awareness about autism, due to her having an autistic son. McCarthy claims that common vaccines can cause autism, despite there not being much science to support her claim (Kugel 2007). This ought to be fairly well-known in the source culture, McCarthy having made appearances on the Oprah Winfrey show and a debate has arisen in America due to her anti-vaccination claims. However, the Swedish target audience could well be less informed than the Americans about the connection between Jenny McCarthy and autism. As should be clear from the discussion about examples (11) and (12), exchanging McCarthy’s name for somebody who is more famous in Sweden is not an option. This means that the translation will have to keep McCarthy’s name as the reference in the sentence, and either trust the target audience to know why she is mentioned (or to look it up) or keep it with a remark or footnote for formal equivalence, for example även om hon dåraktigt nog attackerar vetenskapen (McCarthy hävdar att vanliga vaccinationssprutor kan orsaka autism, övers. annm.). However, again, this solution is disruptive to the text and is too clear a reminder of the text being a translated piece. Once again, borrowing the name is the best solution. Considering the target reader being a somewhat educated person, it is not unlikely that he or she understands the reference without any explanation.

Feuds between intellectuals as a general phenomenon is not confined to any one country or culture, but specific ones might be. Consider the following example:

(14) Only Gore Vidal can use the "C-word" and even then only when referring to...
This is a reference to a feud between Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer. In order to understand this reference, the reader would obviously need to be aware of the feud. Literature being slightly more universal (at least in this instance) than certain sports or religious festivities, it is not true that being American gives the reader an advantage in understanding the reference to the Vidal versus Mailer feud. It would seem that this kind of knowledge would stem from an interest in contemporary American literature, rather than from simply being American. If an American reader with an interest in American literature understands this sentence, there is little reason to believe that a Swedish reader with the same interests will not understand it (even though it might be argued that a Swede interested in literature might have a larger interest in literary events, including feuds, occurring in Sweden). Hence, understanding the reference is related to personal interests rather than to nationality or belonging to a certain culture. Equivalence, in this case, is more or less guaranteed by the reference itself, no distinction needing to be made between original readers and the new target readers. Therefore, it can be argued that the target readers changing is not on its own cause enough to warrant an in-text explanation.

3 Summary

There are various aspects to keep in mind when encountering a problem of the cultural kind in translating any text. Should the translation be semantic or communicative, direct or oblique? The equivalence formal or dynamic? If the interests of the source text clash with those of the target text, which should be prioritized? Naturally, there is no simple overall answer to any of these questions. Every text is different, and so is every case within a text.

In order to arrive at the best solution for each individual translation, it is essential that the translator is clear on the following: where the translation will be published, who the target reader is and also what the message of the source text is. Basically, what does the author want to say? To whom is the author directing the message, and through which media? From knowing the answer to these questions, the translator can begin to explore different solutions to whatever problem he or she is dealing with.
When a word-for-word translation is possible, it might well be the best way to go. However, in Klima’s blog, he frequently uses references to famous people, historic and current events, religious festivities et c. These references are problematic for strictly semantic translations as they make word-for-word translations impossible. Cultural references generally lack natural counterparts in the target language, though there are exceptions. As in the case of cultural stereotypes, it is likely that there is a stereotype in the target culture corresponding to the one used in the source text (if not the very same one), that can be used to keep both the message and the integrity of the source text. Other references, for instance regarding famous people, can be more difficult to transfer to the target audience.

To conclude, first of all a cultural reference needs to be identified in the text. Secondly, the problems with that reference need to be identified. Then follows an analysis of the problem coupled with exploring different translation strategies in order to arrive at the best individual solution for that translation. Furthermore, the risk of making the text too target culture specific has to be weighed against the risk of alienating the target reader in case he or she does not understand the reference. Only after all of these steps are completed can a translator arrive at a translation that serves both the source text and the target reader.
Appendix

Klima, Jeff. Personal e-mail, 27 April 2011.

2011-04-27
Till lenasofiasundqvist@hotmail.com
Från: Jeffrey Klima (jeffklima222@hotmail.com)
Till: lenasofiasundqvist@hotmail.com

Sophia,

Firstly, please call me Jeff. I am tremendously honored that you read my column. I am sorry to get back to you so late, the last several days have been crazy. I am interested in your topic and hope I can be of some help. And please, by all means, feel free to suck up always. You were the inspiration for me writing a new column today (I've been working on other projects lately, and let it lapse somewhat).

Okay, so the people who read my column:

I've done book signings for my first novel recently, and my fan base is more the overweight, young adult, goth female types that feel disenfranchised by society who like the frankness and honesty in my brand of humor. That being said, I do not think any of this group reads my blog.
The Huffington Post reader in my mind, particularly of the "Books" section, is an educated late 20s/early 30s mostly female, predominantly American crowd. My commentators tend to be male, so this flies in the face of my theory somewhat, but nonetheless I believe it skews heavily female.

Ideally, I write for two diverse groups, and I learned this from American radio shock jock Howard Stern: his fan base listened to him on average for 25 minutes to see what he'd say next (approx.). His enemies listened for the same reason, but they listened for an hour and a half.

So I write for both groups: people who are overly critical and read to take me down... they miss the levity and humor of the writing and focus on the minutiae of the facts. They, I imagine, are over 30, bitter, failed writer types who read the Huffpo to gain insight into the writing world. They believe that being an author is a formula, and if they read enough serious analytical studies they'll crack the code and be authors themselves. So I delight in being a thorn in their side in the sense that I teach them little "of value."

The other person I feel I write for is more like you: someone seeking a good laugh amidst all the blog writers who do take themselves to seriously. I imagine these people to be the aforementioned educated female crowd.

I hope this reaches you in time to be some value to your paper (and even to be of help to you at all)... anything further you have questions on that I can possibly help with, I'd be happy to try and answer.

Thanks for writing,

Jeff
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