

SHAPING TRANSCULTURAL MENTALITY THROUGH SONG TRANSLATION

Introduction. Social communication, which takes many forms, is a notion as broad as the human society itself. However, in recent years, largely due to the advent of the Internet, it has been increasing exponentially. Such communication is now global, practically instantaneous and effectively cross-cultural, creating both unprecedented opportunities as well as potential risks.

Fundamental research. The availability of the Internet as a massive communications platform has intensified modern social development trends. On the one hand, social life is clearly becoming more ‘globalised’; on the other, a growing counterbalancing trend might be described in terms of ‘regionalisation’. While this latter trend can be seen in terms of ‘top-down’ political developments, a ‘bottom-up’ development process on the part of the ‘grassroots’ is also taking place: this may be characterised in terms of an increased interest in the global aspects of one’s own cultural heritage.

In such a context, the obvious future way of cultural development of the world lies through the process of further integration. In a somewhat idealised future world, the mentality of human beings who communicate socially online will be neither ‘global-cultural’ or ‘local-cultural’. Rather, it will be the mentality of a third kind, that is to say — *transcultural*.

A pertinent question arises: how can this level of cultural transformation be reached? A preliminary response to this question can be focused around the activities conducted by cultural mediators, whose professional and amateur activities embrace culture-laden areas such as science, education and the arts. In simple terms, researchers, educators and artists are the primary progenitors of this new transcultural mentality.

In her paper entitled “A Researcher as a Soft Power Agent” the Russian sociologist Natalya Popova (2014) describes the personality profile of the above-mentioned individuals as ‘meta-linguistic’. The author argues that such individuals are able to transcend the limits of their native culture and engage effectively in meaningful social communication with representatives of another cultural community [2].

Obviously, the primary instrument of such communication is likely to be the mediator’s fully-fledged communicative competence in a lingua franca. Across today’s international communications network, this lingua franca seems to have unequivocally turned out to be English.

Coming back to the central question of how humanity as a whole can reach the transcultural level, we should focus on its geographical, if not geopolitical, aspects. The Russian linguist S. Vasiliev (1988) once pointed out that we should treat culture as a symbolic space that contains clusters of particular meanings that are in the process of permanent formation. The author assumed that these processes should occur most intensively on the borders between ‘semantic spheres’ — both in terms of space and time [1, p. 146].

The assumption has proved correct in recent decades, at least in the European context. The fall of the USSR and the events that followed it up to this very day led to the emergence of a unique cultural situation — especially in the area that includes, from north to south, the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. Potential cultural mediators living in these countries have obtained access to an amazing variety of cultural information. It is clear that such a situation can lead to the formation of a new, integrated kind of cultural mentality.

While having its own distinctive features, Russia also belongs to the category of countries whose post-Soviet heritage is both a source of great cultural wealth as well as a contributing factor to various current problems. It is well-known, for example, that profound transformations are currently taking place in its educational system. According to the Russian educator I. Sokolova (2009), Russian educational authorities pay particular attention to the promotion of liberal arts education and the creation of conditions for students to acquire professional communication experience [3, p. 14—20].

However, the problem has another aspect. The new transcultural mentality cannot be merely a means of generating exotic local products for export. Moreover, cultural mediators in post-Soviet countries can hardly facilitate the process of cultural transformations working alone. For as long as the language of this new ‘transculture’ remains English, there is a dire necessity for obtaining the assistance from like-minded — preferably bilingual — individuals (scientists, educators, artists) whose native language is English. The authors share an opinion that the best candidate for the position of the modern cultural mediator is the person whose profile combines all the three aspects.

A cultural mediator should be a researcher/educator and a person able to display certain artistic skills. The latter may include skills in the areas of performing, public speaking, literary or journalistic work, and other related ones. The Internet provides a variety of possibilities to identify and unite such individuals living in different countries. The authors’ recent experience can serve as a case study to prove the point.

The Russian-speaking author of the present paper resides in Belarus and works as a teacher of English. Being a cultural mediator by definition, he also engages in literary pursuits as a translator of poetic texts. At present, the object of

his endeavours is the lyrics of Soviet-era war songs that he translates into English. However, assistance from a native speaker, also a serving as a cultural mediator, is a definite requirement. This led to intensive online research that bore fruit in creating contact with an individual who seems to have similar interests.

The Scottish researcher, translator and singer Thomas Beavitt has been working in the Russian cultural space over the last decade. First appearing at a Celtic-themed festival in Moscow in 2008, he promptly returned to present a special 250th anniversary concert of the songs of Robert Burns. A consideration of the role of the 'bard' in contemporary society led to a project translating the songs of Vladimir Vysotsky. Other song and poetry translation projects followed including "Saints & Sinners" featuring poetry written by contemporary Ural poets, poems of Lermontov translated into (Scots) English and set to music and, recently, the Songs of the Great Patriotic War which were performed for the first time in English on the Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd with a Russian orchestra in 2015.

Beavitt, who currently works as a researcher and translator at the Russian Academy of Sciences (Ural Branch) in Ekaterinburg, immediately understood the commonality of purpose and opportunity in working with a Russian-speaking translator who has a much more in-depth understanding of the cultural significance of the songs of the Great Patriotic War. The collaboration project, which is ongoing, should result in a new book featuring translated lyrics and essays describing how these unique cultural artefacts relate to contemporary issues in the post-Soviet world as well as their wider import for the world as a whole.

The process of translating of Soviet / Russian song lyrics, their performance in the context of intercultural events, as well as their recording and dissemination to a wide global online audience, contains two problematic aspects: capturing and transmitting the nuances of semantic and emotional communication contained in the text and rendering the English texts in such a way that they can be sung as musically as in the original Russian. For the former aspect, the participation of a Russian speaker, who has an intimate and familial connection with the post-Soviet space is a sine qua non. For the latter purpose, the requirement is for a native English speaker whose sense of the musicality of the language has been well-attuned over the course of a large number of projects and intercultural experiences.

Conclusion. It goes without saying that such projects can take multiple forms involving more and more professional educators who belong to different cultural communities. Consequently, the system of teacher training — especially foreign language teacher training — should not stay away from these developments. Transcultural mentality can become a notion that can shape the next generation of approaches to teaching English as a lingua franca. Such approaches can primarily emerge in the countries that are located on the border between 'semantic spheres'. That's why there seems to exist a new challenge for Belarusian foreign language methodology.

References

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