

## **Metaphor Translatability, Untranslatability and In-Betweens**

Verona-Elena CIOCIOI (POPA)\*

**Abstract:** Metaphors were traditionally viewed as powerful rhetorical tools, but more recent studies have acknowledged metaphors as cognitive, communicative and cultural elements. Whether linguistic or cognitive, metaphor translation requires metaphor analysis and metaphor analysis entails at least linguistic, communicative, social and cultural competence. Between the totally untranslatable and easily translatable metaphors, there are many other degrees of translatability. The main objective of this paper is to explore some of the techniques of metaphor translation between effortless translatability and total untranslatability by pursuing an inductive approach together with a description of the procedures and strategies used.

**Keywords:** analysis, metaphor, strategy, translation, (un)translatability.

### **1. Introduction**

Metaphors are an interesting phenomenon to study but also an interesting phenomenon to translate. We shall consider metaphor not as a rhetorical device which designates analogy or comparison between two more or less similar concepts but as a creative figure of speech which stirs emotions and develops imagination. However, the metaphor is not only a matter of figurative language, it is a matter of language in general; it is not only a matter of imagination, it is a matter of reasoning as well. The ground-breaking cognitive theory metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 has changed and shaped the way we view metaphors. Consequently, it is not only metaphors that were viewed differently but also the translation process. It has to render as accurately as possible not only the message but also the attitude, the values, the

---

\* PhD Student, "Alexandru Piru" Doctoral School, University of Craiova, Romania. E-mail:  
[verona\\_popa@yahoo.com](mailto:verona_popa@yahoo.com)

response of the receiver, the emotional impact. Do metaphors cross the barriers of translation and unite cultures? Translation cannot be achieved if it ignores the problems it comes across. Metaphors are one such obstacle, because transferring one metaphor from the source language into the target language involves not only linguistic but also cultural competence. As Schäffner states: “[t]ranslatability is no longer a question of the individual metaphorical expression, as identified in the ST, but it becomes linked to the level of conceptual systems in source and target culture. (Schäffner, 2004: 1258).

## 2. Defining metaphors

Traditionally, the metaphor has been assimilated to an abridged or an elliptical comparison. Seen as a comparison, the metaphor can be interpreted literally, since the two terms contain obvious similarities; (the famous example: *John is a lion* – both terms are characterized by courage, bravery) but also figuratively (since John is not actually a lion). However, describing a metaphor does not fully do justice to the image illustrated by the metaphor. To put it bluntly, according to the semantic view on metaphor, the literal seemingly nonsensical association of words can be explained metaphorically. In this respect, Searle (1979/1993) offers an elaborate theory of metaphor. He underpins a descriptive version and places great emphasis on the role of conventions in interpreting the metaphor. For the theorist, the metaphoric mechanism is part of the general problem – when the speaker says something, but intends to communicate something else. Thus, the actual meaning of the speaker, the meaning the speaker intends to communicate and the meaning of the statement are separate, although united by a metaphoric bridge. The meaning of the sentence should not be confused with the meaning of the speaker. Metaphors can lead to changes of meaning and Searle claims that there should be a clear-cut separation between the literal meaning of the word or the utterance and the metaphorical meaning of the speaker.

“The problem of explaining how metaphors work is a special case of the general problem of explaining how speaker meaning and sentence or meaning come apart. It is a special case, that is, of the problem of possible to say one thing and mean something else, where one is communicating what one means even though both the speaker hearer know that the meanings of the words uttered by the speaker exactly and literally express what the speaker meant.” (Searle, 1993: 83-84).

It is commonplace among theorists (and not only) these days that metaphors cannot be regarded merely as comparisons. No theory alone can account for the existence of all metaphors, for the prevalence of some metaphors, for the falling out of use of certain metaphors or the insurgence of others. The metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon as much as it is a philosophical one and a pragmatic one. The growing interest in metaphors has led to numerous studies and extensive writing about them and many of these studies acknowledge the fact that metaphors link different domains, different concepts both linguistically and mentally, but, at the same time, they are based on the speaker’s or the listener’s experience and knowledge about these concepts

or even domains. The lack of consensus comes when trying to explain the mechanisms that stand behind the production of metaphors and what triggers the association of certain words or concepts. And how is it that in some cases, the metaphoric expression is not only more powerful, but also clearer and more suggestive than the literal expression?

Metaphors, text analysis and translation would benefit greater from a pluralistic approach. Metaphors may be seen from a semantic, linguistic, philosophical, pragmatic perspective and not only. Each approach contributes greatly to the understanding of metaphor as a part of the philosophy of language and of our reality.

### 3. Types of metaphors

Where can metaphors be encountered? Contrary to popular belief, which associates the abundance of metaphors with literature, they can be encountered in any type of text, be it literal or non-literal. It is true that literature abounds in metaphors, but these figures of speech are not the exclusive attribute of literature. They can be encountered in the *Bible* – *The Lord is my shepherd.* (Psalm 23:1) / *The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life.* (Proverbs 13:14), in everyday speech – *Time is money.* / *To be dead tired.* / *It's a piece of cake.* / *Information travels fast.* / *It's raining cats and dogs.* / *To jump for joy.* / *To run an errand.*; in scientific terminology – *The fight against a disease.* / *Antibiotics have become weapons ...* / *The black holes of the universe.* / *The brain runs the body.* / *To surf the internet.* / *Cobwebs = dead web pages* / *Snail mail = the ordinary postal system as opposed to email* to give just a few examples.

Newmark (1988) defines metaphors as an indirect comparison, a comparison between two or more concepts or things which apparently do not share any resemblance. He also points out that the basic function of a metaphor is to describe a concept or a thing more convincingly and more vigorously than its literal counterpart. According to the theorist “any word can be a metaphor, and its sense has to be teased out by matching its primary meaning against its linguistic, situational and cultural contexts.” (Newmark, 1988: 106). Understanding the type of metaphor the translator is dealing with is extremely important because it may help him select the most appropriate translation strategy.

Newmark distinguishes between six different types of metaphors: *dead*, *cliché*, *stock*, *adapted*, *recent* and *original* and the linguist suggests the best translation strategy in connection with each type of metaphor.

*Dead metaphors* – those metaphors that are so ingrained in our language and in our thinking that we hardly perceive them as metaphoric expressions and “frequently relate to universal terms of space and time, the main part of the body, general ecological features and the main human activities:” (ibid.). Usually, they are not a challenge for the translator.

*Cliché metaphors* – which continue to be encountered in spite of their cliché usage (e.g. long time, no see; a transparent lie); Newmark advises translators to avoid clichés whenever dealing with an informative text.

*Stock or standard metaphors* – those metaphors that have an emotional value and which are not outlived by overuse. Newmark defines a stock metaphor “as an established metaphor which in an informal context is an efficient and concise method of covering a physical and/or mental situation both referentially and pragmatically”. (idem: 108). These metaphors are frequently encountered in informal language (e.g. the body of a car; he sees fear in my heart). In translating such metaphors, Newmark advocates naturalness, since their equivalent in the SL may be outdated or favoured by a certain class or age category and he proposes a three-model translation for stock metaphors: reproducing the same image in the TL; replacing the SL image with another established TL image; reducing to sense or literal language.

*Adapted metaphors* – the theorist recommends translating them by an “equivalent adapted metaphor” and he provides examples such as: “the ball is a little in their court” or “get them in the door” (idem: 111).

*Recent metaphors* – which Newmark identifies with metaphorical neologisms. Languages improve constantly, so it is only natural to witness the emergence of new metaphors.

*Original metaphors* – born out of writers’ creativity and imagination to make their writing / discourse more interesting, more convincing or emotional. Seen as a source of enriching vocabulary, Newmark recommends translating them as such, even if sometimes this type of translation may stray too far from the original.

Another famous classification is offered by Lakoff and Johnson (2003). Here, we will refer to three types of metaphors:

1. *Structural metaphors* – understanding one concept in terms of another, although metaphors do not fully identify with the concept they designate. For instance, “argument is war”, “life is a journey”. We can speak only of partial structuring. If the two concepts were identical, there would be no metaphor.
2. *Oriental metaphors* – when an entire network of concepts is viewed in relation to physical orientation. For example, happiness is up (boosted or high spirits, raise morale) while sadness is down (depressed, down in the dumps, feeling low). The future is ahead, whereas the past is behind.
3. *Ontological metaphors* – which help us define things or concepts as an agent (inflation is taking its toll), they help us to quantify a concept (a lot of patience), to identify aspects of it (brutality of war), or to identify causes or goals (this heat is driving me mad; off to seek his fortune). We also view events, actions, activities and states as containers - such as getting into or out of trouble, being in a race, getting satisfaction out of doing something.

#### **4. Translation strategies**

Translation, like any other discipline, has seen changes of perspective over the years. It developed out of people's need to cross barriers and understand other cultures. The way translation is done has been adjusted and remodelled along with the changes brought forth in other disciplines and areas of study, since translation is a multidisciplinary phenomenon. Translation can be imagined as a puzzle and each researcher and theorist brought a new piece to this beautiful but challenging puzzle. Vilceanu states that translation needs working and reworking, turning back to the original over and over again. A translation, especially in the making, will not stand alone, enjoying an independent status; on the contrary, the translator will move back and forth between the original and the target language text, interconnecting them so as to secure re-contextualisation. (Vilceanu, 2017: 142).

Nida defines translation as a "decoding" process, since language is seen as a system and the translator should be identified with his translation. (Nida, 1964: 145-147). In his next ground-breaking book, the linguist admits that in the past translation focused on "form of the message" and "[t]he new focus, however, has shifted from the form of the message to the response of the receptor." And the question "Is this a good translation?" should be followed by the question "For whom?" (Nida, 1969: 1).

Since translation proper is very difficult to achieve in most situations and the ideal prerequisites of a perfect translation are hard to meet (if ever), Nida (1964) proposes some translation strategies, among which: *additions*, which may be deservedly inserted into the translation because they make "explicit what is implicit in the source-language text." (Nida, 1964, 231); *subtractions*, less frequent than *additions* but equally important and perfectly justified to be used as long as they do not change the meaning of the message; *alterations*, to a greater or lesser degree, which may go from sound to word order or to sentence structure alterations; *the use of footnotes*, whenever that is felt necessary to clarify the translation; *adjustments of language to experience*, which seems easier said than done, because it requires thorough research and laborious work. Since translation can be considered a work of art that needs polishing, we can say that the translator is the architect and the constructor that builds the bridge between the source-language text and the target-language text. Such work requires careful preparation and different techniques, therefore, Nida (1964) suggests these translation procedures which involve working and reworking on the text before proceeding to the translation itself.

According to Newmark, translation theory's indisputable purpose is "to determine appropriate translation methods for the widest possible range of texts or text categories [ ... and to provide] a framework of principles, restricted rules and hints for translating texts and criticizing translations, a background for problem-solving" and last, but not least "to give some insights into the relation between thought, meaning and language." (Newmark, 1981: 19).

Newmark (1988) reflects on important translation-related aspects and offers a practical guide on essential aspects connected both to the theory and the practice of translation, on how to approach a text before translating it and what procedures to

adopt depending upon the intention of the text, the text type, the functions of the text and the purpose of the translation. Newmark proposes a vast array of translation methods, each with its advantages and disadvantages: *word-for-word translation* – which might help the translator understand the mechanisms of the SL; *literal translation* – trying to find the nearest equivalent from the SL into the TL; *faithful translation* – trying to remain faithful to both the grammatical structures and the meaning of the text to be translated; *semantic translation* – which goes further from the faithful translation through its flexibility and the fact that it pays more attention to the aesthetic features of a text; *adaptation* – which resembles more like rewriting the original text and free translation – which renders the content but not the form of the original text.

Snell-Hornby (1995) views translation as a *cross-cultural event*. Translation is a transference process not only between languages, but between cultures as well and it cannot function outside the culture within which the original text was produced nor can it function outside the culture into which the target text has to be integrated. Language is part of the culture – and in defining culture, Snell-Hornby adopts Hymes' (1964) “broader anthropological” perspective and refers to culture as a phenomenon encapsulating “all *socially conditioned* aspects of human life.” (Snell-Hornby, 1995: 39). She adopts a balanced view between the principle of language relativity, which claims that thought is conditioned by language and the principle of language universals, where translation is just language put into a different code. The extreme situations are that nothing is translatable or, on the contrary, everything is translatable. Either extreme is unrealistic and collapsible. Language defines individuals and cultures, translations make use of language, therefore, by logical extension, translation is related to culture. The most important aspect is to determine the degree to which a text is translatable and how to translate it. The translator must, in this case, become an analytical inquisitive reader. Similarly, she does not favour any extreme when it comes to adopting a translation procedure: “underdifferentiated” translation, the type of translation that mirrors the original in every possible way and “overdifferentiated” translation, the type of translation which renders as “much as necessary”, not “as much of the original as possible”. (Snell-Hornby, 1995: 45). In meeting the two extremes, she adopts the view of translation as a cross-cultural event, and the link can be established between languages which are closely related, but also between completely different languages.

Special attention must be given to the translation of the metaphor, since metaphors can be seen as texts in themselves and in this respect, Snell-Hornby rejects Newmark's view of “one-word metaphors (a *sunny* girl)” (Newmark, 1981: 85) and to her the difficulty resides in the fact that “the sense of the metaphor is frequently culture-specific” (Snell-Hornby, 1995: 56) since different languages and, implicitly, different cultures conceptualise metaphors in different ways.

The metaphor has at least two major functions: a cognitive and a pragmatic function – in this case the metaphor is used to describe a person, an object, a concept in

a more comprehensible and a more concise way than the literal language – and an aesthetic goal – the metaphor appeals to the senses, it attempts to please, to surprise. In order to translate a metaphor, the translator has to identify not only the metaphor but also the role it plays in the context. The function played by the metaphor in the particular text in which it appears will thus play a role during its translation. There are numerous problems that the translator encounters during the translation process.

One of the problems s/he confronts with is whether the utterance to be translated is literal or figurative. Without sufficient context, how do you know if “the icing on the cake” refers properly to “the coating used for cakes” (literal interpretation) or “something extra that makes a good thing even better”<sup>1</sup> (metaphoric interpretation). In some cases this opposition is more than obvious but there are situations when even the translator will be hard-pressed to decide whether the statement should be decoded literally or metaphorically; this is normal if we judge by the nature of the metaphor, which, when it is non-lexicalized, is perceived as a metaphor, but when it is completely lexicalized, it loses its metaphorical origin, and is perceived literally. But between these two positions, there are always in-betweens, and the detection of the metaphor is not always easy. Sometimes a metaphor plays on both levels and the translation should be rendered by means of a metaphorical lexicon – otherwise a part of the meaning will be lost, and the translator will face what is referred to as a phenomenon of entropy.

Another element that may cause difficulty for the translator is the tight dependence of the text upon the context. There are many situations when it is only through context that the metaphor can be decoded correctly, and its translation cannot be done without resorting to the context in which it appears. This idea led Kirstin Mason to state that: “Any metaphors that occur in the text must be interpreted within the context of the whole text and translated accordingly.” (Mason, 1982: 142). We must therefore consider the text in its historical, social, cultural and even political environment: where has it been produced, by whom, for whom, under what circumstances? The metaphor is determinable as such only in a particular cultural context, that of the particular text in which it appears. The translator must therefore first be familiar with the text (the linguistic aspect) and the context (the extra linguistic aspect) in which a text and implicitly a metaphor was produced.

A metaphor always says more than its synonymous literal counterpart, if it weren't more expressive or more eloquent a non-metaphorical statement would have been used; the meaning of a metaphor lies precisely in this implicit, expressive feature. The problem is to try to retain (as much as possible) this implicitness in the translation, and that is why the translation of a metaphor by means of another metaphor remains the best solution, because the effects are thus preserved. The metaphor always represents a surplus not only of aesthetic effect but also of cognitive work for the enunciator during the encoding and for the co-enunciator during the decoding. The idiom “to spill the beans” could be translated properly as “a scoate la iveala secretul / a

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icing%20on%20the%20cake>

spune tot – *reveal a secret*”, but it can also be more beautifully and aesthetically significant rendered through its figurative equivalent “a se da de gol / a scapa porumbelul – similar to the idiom *to let the cat out of the bag*”. Or the sentence: *She has dreams*. – can be rendered into Romanian in two different ways, as Romanian has two different plural forms, depending on the connotation of the word “dreams”. Thus: “Ea are vise” (proper meaning) or “Ea are visuri.” (figurative meaning).

The translation of certain metaphors by other metaphors is not always possible, either because of cultural or lexical reasons, which leads Dagut (1987) to state that certain metaphors remain untranslatable, but recognizes that many metaphors are translatable, as soon as there is cultural and lexical congruence between the two languages,

Newmark remarks that the precise meaning of the metaphor is hardly discernible: “the literal meaning of the metaphor; the resemblance or the semantic area overlapping object and image; usually this consists of more than one sense component - otherwise literal language would do.” (Newmark, 1988: 105). Only by taking into account both the implicitness and the explicitness of a metaphor can a translator achieve a communicative effect which is within and beyond language itself. This reminds us that the expressive character of any metaphor is accompanied by a constitutive polysemy. The danger to which the translator is confronted when translating a metaphor resides in this polysemy, because s/he can see in the metaphor things that are not there explicitly.

Faced with the question of the translation of the metaphor, translators have always hesitated between two opposing positions: either that the metaphor poses no particular problems, or that it is simply untranslatable. The question of the translation of the metaphor still needs to receive a great deal of attention and be given the importance it deserves, partly because of its aesthetic functions and partly because of the impossibility of emitting generalizations or generalizing principles on the translatability of the metaphor.

However, it is important that Translation Studies finds some generalizations for the translation of the metaphor, otherwise it resorts to intuitive translation. More than rules, there are processes and strategies that can be found and applied, methods which, in spite of not being 100% generalizable, can help bridge the contrastive tendencies between two languages and situate the translation of the metaphor reasonably somewhere between “easily translatable” and “totally untranslatable”.

## **5. Translatable vs. non-translatable metaphors**

Catford (1965) and Popovič (1976) provide two types of untranslatability:

- linguistic untranslatability: when we can speak of neither lexical nor syntactical correspondence between the SL and the TL.
- cultural untranslatability: when we can speak of neither cultural nor situational correspondence between the SL and the TL.



Whether metaphors are translatable or untranslatable or the implications of the degrees between translatability and untranslatability is a matter of controversy. Metaphor translation is influenced by many factors, besides the linguistic ones: the purpose of the communicative act, the type of the metaphor in question, the context in which it is used, the information carried, the compatibility between the lexical and formal structures between the source language and the target language, the translator's competence and many others. Given the variety of parameters that can influence the degree of metaphor translatability, it would be unrealistic to expect unanimous consent regarding the easiness and the flexibility with which a metaphor can be transferred from the source language into the target language. Theorists have tried to classify metaphors according to their degree of translatability keeping in mind that metaphors are in many cases an unpredictable phenomenon. However, we can pinpoint four important standpoints:

- a) *Metaphors are untranslatable*, view held by linguists such as Nida (1964), Dagut (1976) who consider that the outcome of a metaphor translation is in fact a new metaphor.
- b) *Metaphors are fully translatable*, in the view of Reiss (1971), Mason (1982),
- c) *Metaphors are translatable but pose a considerable degree of inequivalence*, position adopted by Van Den Broeck (1981), Newmark (1988) – considering that each metaphor requires certain translational peculiarities.
- d) *Conciliatory approach*, proposed by Snell-Hornby (1988), which deals with both the flexibility of the text to be translated and the flexibility of the translator.

These are among the scholars who saw the full potential of metaphoric expressions in translation and considered that the translation process needs closer observation and further research. This problem of the translatability or untranslatability of the metaphor has always been a bordering line between various researchers who have addressed this problem, and the answer lies somewhere between the two positions; no rule can say *a priori* if the metaphor is or is not translatable; that is why Mary Snell-Hornby (1988: 41) uses the term “scale of translatability”, which in fact refers to the degree of translatability, to in-betweens, which can partly be determined according to context.

## 6. Conclusions

Who says that translating, let alone translating metaphors from the SL into the TL, is an easy task? Although strategies and techniques are useful and necessary, there is no universal solution. The task is complicated further by the fact that each utterance has to be judged and analysed individually, taking into account the proper context before making a decision. The metaphor is neither a deviation nor a mere embellishment of literal language. It is a matter of language as much as it is a matter of

thought. In our view, the retention of the metaphoric term in the SL language is advisable whenever it is possible. The creation of a metaphor is a linguistic, cultural and cognitive act, but so is the understanding and the translation of a metaphorical term. The creation and the translation of metaphors are unique acts and they have to be treated as such!

### References

1. Broeck, R. Van Den 1981. "The limits of translatability exemplified by metaphor translation". In *Poetics Today* 2(4), pp. 73-87.
2. Catford J. C. 1965. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*, London, Oxford University Press.
3. Dagut, M.B. 1976. Can "Metaphor" Be Translated? In *Babel: International Journal of Translation*, 12(1), pp. 21-33.
4. Dagut, M.B. 1987. More about the Translatability of Metaphor. In *Babel* 33.2, 1987, p. 77-83.
5. Hymes, D. 1964. *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. New York: Harper & Row.
6. Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. 2003 (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. London: The University of Chicago Press.
7. Mason, K. 1982. "Metaphor and Translation". In *Babel* 28(3), pp. 140-149.
8. Newmark, P. 1981. *Approaches to Translation*. Oxford, Pergamon.
9. Newmark, P. 1988. *A Textbook of Translation*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
10. Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
11. Nida, E.A., Taber, C.R. 1982 (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
12. Popovič. A. 1976. *A Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation*, Edmonton, Alberta, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Alberta.
13. Reiss, K. 2000 (1971). "Type, kind and individuality of text: decision making in translation", in Venuti, L. *The translation studies reader*. London: Routledge.
14. Schöffner, C. 2004. "Metaphor and translation: Some implications of a cognitive approach". In *Journal of Pragmatics*. No. 36, pp. 1253–1269.
15. Searle, J.R. 1993 (1979). "Metaphor". In Andrew Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 83-111.
16. Snell-Hornby, M. 1995 (1988). *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
17. Vilceanu, T., 2017, "Quality Assurance in Translation. A Process-Oriented Approach" in *Romanian Journal of English Studies* (RJES), ISSN: 1584-3734, p. 141-146, <https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/rjes>
18. <https://literarydevices.net/famous-metaphors-in-the-bible/>