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## **TRANSLATING TABOO WORDS IN POLITICAL MEDIA DISCOURSE – CHALLENGES FOR TRANSLATORS**

*Recent political events and significant challenges experienced by translators in the field of political media discourse around the world led me to this research dealing with taboo words in the translation. The issue of translating taboo and swear words has been extensively studied in the fields of audio-visual and literary translation, however the topic received less attention in the field of media translation. For the purpose of this research, source language texts and translations into Russian provided by multilingual media agencies, such as the BBC and Euronews were analysed in this paper.*

**KEYWORDS:** taboo lexical units, political media discourse, translation challenges, translation strategy, news item.

Before we consider the use of taboo words in political media discourse and their translation into other languages we need to establish what taboo actually means and whether we can identify certain parameters to be used in our research. Allan and Burridge suggested a definition of the word taboo and referred it “to forbidden behaviour” (2006, p. 237). Taboo words may, for example, include swear words, other lexical items referring to sexual activity or body parts, profanity and represent a cultural phenomenon. Ljung (2011) suggests that the use of taboo words adds emphasis to the message the writer or the speaker wishes to convey, and their functioning in the text reveals the attitudes and feelings of the author. The latter is crucial for our research, since we are analysing the source language news items and their translations in this paper.

The perception and usage of taboo and vulgar words will differ from one culture to another. Some taboo words may not even exist in some other languages or cultures. At the same time, “what is considered taboo will differ in different cultural contexts and therefore serves as an indicator of social and cultural values” (Swann et al., 2004, p. 309). Acceptability by the target readership is another

important factor which should be taken into account in the process of assessing translations from one language/culture to another. Toury suggested that in order to produce an acceptable target text, the translator has to follow the target language norms (1995). In view of cultural and social variables in the use of taboo words, as well as linguistic censoring which may apply in certain cultures and media agencies, their transfer from one language and culture to another language and culture will inevitably lead to some challenges in identifying the most appropriate translation strategies.

The translation of taboo words received extensive attention in the fields of literature, cinema and the mass media where the authors aim to present natural and realistic language use (Fernández Dobao, 2006, p. 222). The general tendency when translating a taboo word is to convey the function and sense of the taboo lexical item in the text, since it expresses an attitude of the speaker or writer and the degree of offensiveness. The form is normally less important and literal translation does not usually work. On the whole, we can also observe that translators working in various audio-visual fields tend to replace taboo words with less offensive words or milder versions in the target language. Whereas, literary translators tend to preserve the intensity and semantic values of the source language taboo words and vulgarisms in order to ensure that the author's colourful description of the character or context is preserved in the target text.

But what do translators do in political media discourse? Do they call a spade a spade? The attitudes and feelings as well as the degree of offensiveness are so important in political and diplomatic discourse. These and other translation challenges are investigated in this research which covers source texts and their translations from English into Russian from April 2017 till March 2018. The research also tests whether translation strategies employed by translators in audio-visual and literary translations are valid in the translation of vulgar and taboo lexical units in news narratives from English into Russian.

It is worth noting that taboo words are not a regular feature of political media discourse. It is therefore, the editors, writers, journalists and translators who work in the field may not be prepared and generally find it especially challenging when dealing with taboo lexical items. Our study attempts to assess the challenges in translation of taboo words in the work of multilingual mass media organisations. For this purpose, we have chosen multilingual news agencies the BBC and Euronews and analysed all news items containing taboo words. Using documentation method, we collected the data in the form of news items, phrases and sentences for the period of one year from April 2017 until March 2018. In our research the English language news items represented the Source Language

Texts (SLT) while the Russian language news were the Target Language Texts (TLT).

Some of our examples turned out to be in the field of sports in which individuals were reported to use certain taboo words to express their feelings or attitudes with a degree of offensiveness. These examples constituted 33% of all examples, and most of these examples were collected from the BBC. However, the most dominant taboo word in political news during the period identified for our study was the lexical item “shithole” reportedly used by the US President Donald Trump in January 2018. Before this, the word was registered only once during the period of our study and was used by Sinn Féin Mayor of Newry in reference to Bangor.

The taboo word ‘shithole’ is central in our research, since this was allegedly mentioned by the US President, and all agencies had to report this in their news bulletins in all languages. The first news item containing this taboo word appeared on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2018, and since then there were overall 25 news items containing this lexical item in the SLT on the BBC and 26 on Euronews.

Before we proceed to discussing translation strategies, it will be useful to analyse the SLT and the presentation of the insulting word ‘shithole’ in the titles and texts of SLT news items published by the BBC and Euronews. In the majority of instances, the BBC writers and journalists aimed to avoid the insulting word in the title of their news items and substituted with the expression of ‘shock’, ‘racist slur’, ‘alleged slur’, ‘crude remark’, e.g. news item *Trump 'in crude Oval Office outburst about migrants'* published on 12 January 2018<sup>1</sup>. There was only one instance when the BBC used “shithole” in the title of the news item<sup>2</sup>. This approach significantly reduced the degree of offensiveness of the news items. On the contrary, Euronews used more often the lexical item in the titles of news items. Perhaps, when the news broke on 12<sup>th</sup> January, the editors were not sure about the presentation of the taboo item in the title of the news item and initially resorted to the use of asterisks, e.g. ‘s\*\*\*hole countries’<sup>3</sup>. They also consistently used single inverted commas when they presented the lexical item in the title. The term was used as an adjective, e.g. ‘shithole’ countries, or a compound adjective describing a noun, e.g. ‘shithole countries’ remark, or as a noun, e.g. ‘shithole’.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-42656433>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09kq1lm>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.euronews.com/2018/01/12/trump-slams-immigration-from-s-hole-countries->

When we analysed and compared the use of the term in the body of selected texts from the BBC and Euronews, we identified the following differences summarised in Table 1 below. The main differences were in the use of adjective “shithole in

<b>BBC</b>	<b>Euronews</b>
The use of either double inverted commas or no inverted commas	The use of single or double inverted commas
Used as a noun or an adjective	Used as a noun or an adjective
Singular and plural	Singular
Mostly used with the noun “countries”	Used with the noun “countries” as well as other nouns
The element of the word “shit” is combined with other nouns	No other derivatives were registered
Used with a small letter	One instance of capital letter use

Table 1. The comparative analysis of the use of the taboo lexical item “shithole” in SL texts published by the BBC and Euronews.

combination with other nouns, e.g. ‘shithole’ comments, “shithole” remarks, while the BBC mentioned another noun “shithouse” in one of the news items<sup>4</sup>. Almost all texts published by both news agencies, especially after the initial use of the lexical item on 12 January, presented the term either in double or single inverted commas with the aim of distancing themselves from the term and reducing the degree of offensiveness to the target readership.

When transferring the taboo words into a different culture and language translators normally resort to various translation strategies, e.g. omission, substitution, and grammatical transformation. Baker (1992) specifically addressed this issue and suggested that there was no harm in omitting a word as long as the meaning is conveyed, however, she also admitted that omission must generate a loss in translation.

In our particular case, when the news was reported by all news agencies, the challenge for translators was to find an equivalent lexical item which will preserve the degree of offensiveness, its expressive characteristics, and at the same time, will conform to the norms and standards in target language culture and be acceptable for the target readership. The challenge was particularly pronounced due to the lack of time the translators had in order to resolve this translation puzzle, the significance of the vulgar and substandard phrase for communicating US President’s immigration policy and unusual character in using the lexical item ‘shithole’ in relation to certain countries.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-42696389>

Initially, the BBC and Euronews translations into Russian resorted to omission of the taboo word in the titles of their news items, e.g. Как Трамп оскорбил страны третьего мира<sup>5</sup> [lit: How Trump insulted third world countries]. This approach enabled the translators to avoid using any offensive language in the title and fall in line with the standards accepted in the Russian political mass media. While Euronews used both omission and partial substitution. The latter is worth considering separately, and the way “shithole” was translated into Russian by these two news agencies since there is no direct equivalent in Russian.

The compound taboo lexical item consists of two nouns: shit and hole. Russian translators in both agencies did not have any problems with the second element and translated it as дыра [lit: hole], which contains an additional meaning of a remote provincial place as in the English phrase ‘to live in the sticks’. However, the taboo element ‘shit’ presented numerous challenges. First of all, translators had to introduce grammatical transformation changing the source text ‘noun+noun’ construction into ‘adjective+noun’ in the target language. Secondly, the direct translation of the lexical item ‘shit’ was not acceptable in view of source language standards and norms and unpreparedness of the audience for reading taboo items like ‘shithole’ in political mass media. The BBC translators resorted to the use of an adjective вонючий [lit: stinking] while the preferred adjective in Euronews Russian news was грязный [lit: dirty], although there were a couple of instances when they used the adjective вонючий [lit: stinking] as well. This approach enabled the translators to transfer the meaning of the SL lexical unit in the TT with some degree of offensiveness and at the same time, produce a two-word phrase вонючие дыры [lit: stinking holes] which made it possible to substitute the entire SL phrase “shithole countries” since the Russian word “hole” has an additional meaning of a remote and provincial place.

The proposed approach saw further development in the BBC publication of 24<sup>th</sup> January where the translator used глухие дыры<sup>6</sup> [lit: remote, out-of-the-way, god-forsaken hole], which may have reduced the degree of offensiveness even further. It is interesting that towards the end of the article the translator resorts to explaining the SLT phrase allegedly used by the US President and uses the English word as well: Как сообщалось, президент Трамп якобы произнес слова "вонючие дыры" (в английском языке слово shithole означает захолустье, глухую дыру)... [lit: As it was reported, President Trump allegedly used the words “stinking holes” (in the English language, the word shithole means out-of-the-way place, remote hole)...]. This is the only recorded case of using the original term and an explanation in the Russian translation on the BBC. Our

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-42658250>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-42794705>

observations of other language news services of the BBC and Euronews showed that some language services resorted to this strategy when the word was reported for the first time on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

In conclusion, our research and observations confirm that similar strategies, such as omission, substitution, and grammatical transformation are employed in the translation of taboo words in political media discourse. On top of that, translators may also borrow the original source language word and provide further explanation of the meaning for the target readership in order to reveal the attitudes or feelings of the author.

The research also established that both news agencies tend to avoid using taboo lexical items in the titles of their news items or articles to reduce the degree of offensiveness. For the purpose of distancing themselves, news agencies also use taboo words in either double or single inverted commas.

It should be noted, that this research aims to encourage further analysis of translation practice and establishing new approaches and strategies of translating taboo words in the field of political media discourse.

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