

TRANSLATION IMPOSSIBILITIES: PROBLEMS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEFL

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INTRODUCTION

Translation has a long history in English Language Teaching (Howatt, 1984; Richards & Rogers, 1986; 3-4) and is still employed by a great number of teachers in monolingual contexts, as well as some materials writers. Translation is most frequently used as a convenient shortcut when teaching vocabulary, by providing 'equivalents' in the learners' mother

tongue. Unfortunately, such practice creates a number of serious long-term problems for learners. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, language is not a mere collection of words and grammar rules; it is the expression of a culture. It embodies the efforts of a language community to conceptualise and interpret the world, as well as human experience and relations. As a result, language reflects the complex 'personality' of such a community. Therefore, language can only be interpreted and learned with reference to a specific cultural context. Uncritical use of translation, which does not take account of language idiosyncrasies resulting from cultural factors will invariably lead learners to formulate in their minds a non-existent relation between English and their mother tongue (in our case Greek). As Kramsch (1993: 1) puts it,

culture ... is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.

Raimes (1998: 11) provides a very clear example of how culture can unsettle a language learner from her own experience in learning Japanese:

After I'd laboriously learned to count to 20, I found out that Japanese has ... different words for counting flat objects ... or cylindrical objects.

Secondly, translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account a number of different aspects, such as grammar (e.g. transitivity of verbs), syntax, collocation and connotation. Uncritical use of translation may give learners insufficient, confusing or even inaccurate information about the target language.

In this article I will examine: a. limitations of translation due to cultural differences, b. pitfalls of its uncritical use, and c. ways in which translation can contribute to foreign language learning.

LIMITATIONS

In this section I will look at different instances when translation is either impossible or potentially problematic as a result of differences between British and Greek culture.¹

To stress the point, the majority of examples selected are not concepts, but common, everyday objects and expressions.

Items not common in the two cultures

English ⇔	Greek	English ⇔	Greek
tea-cosy			σουβλάκι
glorified			φιλότιμο
'be a good sport'			'καλό μνην'

Translation here is impossible as these items, concepts and expressions are not common in the two cultures. We can of course explain their meaning but we cannot give equivalents.

Different view of the world

English	⇔	Greek
yellow pages		χρυσός οδηγός

This pair of 'equivalents' shows that as the two cultures look at the world in different ways they also find different ways to express it; as a result 'κίτρινες σελίδες' and 'golden guide' will seem equally absurd to speakers of either language.

Items seemingly common but...

Can we safely translate *lunch* into *μεσημεριανό*? The following table outlines three differences between the two meals.

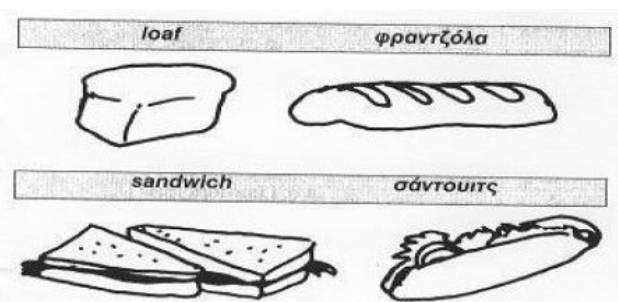
	lunch	μεσημεριανό
When?	Around 1pm.	No specific time. Can be anytime between 12 and 4.
Where?	Usually at people's place of work/study.	Traditionally at home. Also at home for primary & secondary school children. At the place of work/study for professionals/students.
What?	Usually a snack (e.g. sandwich), or a light meal.	Anything between a snack and a full meal.

I am not claiming that *μεσημεριανό* and *lunch* are completely dissimilar. My point is that if we simply teach them as if they were exactly the same, we deprive our learners of information that will help them gain insights into

the culture behind the language they are learning. Such treatment of vocabulary may well lead them to draw false conclusions about the other culture/language.

Different prototypes

Draw a *loaf* or φραντζόλα, and a *sandwich* or σάντουιτς (according to your mother tongue). Compare your drawings with the ones in the following tables (drawings by Steven Bower).



The typical Greek φραντζόλα does not have the same shape as a typical English *loaf* (which in Greek is ψωμί φόρμας), and the same applies to *sandwich* and σάντουιτς. A further difference seems to be that the typical *sandwich* tends to have fewer ingredients than a typical σάντουιτς. It is also interesting to notice that although cucumbers are common in both cultures, cucumber sandwiches are not. Actually, Greeks will find the idea of a cucumber sandwich rather odd.² These examples demonstrate that even seemingly common items may be different in some respects (e.g. shape and content).

Different number of words

English	⇒	Greek
safety, security, insurance, fuse		ασφάλεια
bank		τράπεζα, όχθη, ανάχωμα, πλαγιά

This is an example of the fact that while one language may make a word 'do a lot of work' (that is, use it to denote a variety of meanings), another may have separate words for these meanings. Learners should be made aware of this, so that they do not always expect one-to-one correspondence between the two languages.

Word vs. Expression

English	⇒	Greek
blow my own trumpet		περιαυτολογώ
criss-cross		τέμνω, κλπ σταυροειδώς

It is important for learners to realise that whereas a language may express a meaning with a single word,

another may well use an expression.

Different categorisation

Compare the tense systems of English and Greek. The fact that there is no one-to-one relation between tenses is an example of the different ways in which different cultures understand and categorise their experience. For example, English has separate tenses for 'action in progress now' and 'present habit', whereas Greek has a single tense for both concepts.

Different collocations

Please translate the following (adapted from Gairns & Redman, 1986: 7):

English	⇒	Greek	Greek	⇒	English
white			μαύρος		
dead			μεγάλος		

Now translate the following:

English	⇒	Greek	Greek	⇒	English
white coffee			μαύρη ζωή		
dead serious			μεγάλη Παρασκευή		

There are two reasons for the different translation of the same words in the examples above. First, words do not exist in isolation, but interact with others in discourse. This interaction results in changes in meaning. Second, words seem to be particular regarding the "company they keep" (Mackin, 1978). This is because the members of a language community seem to feel that some words/meanings are more compatible 'partners' than others. For example, strong alcoholic drinks (e.g. vodka) without anything else in them are 'straight', whereas coffee is 'black', and an omelette is 'plain'.

Different connotations

Are the following pairs total equivalents?

English	⇒	Greek
calf		μοσχάρι
teacher		δάσκαλος

As far as their core meaning is concerned, the words above are equivalents. Nevertheless, the Greek words have connotations that the English ones do not share. Μοσχάρι can be used as an insult, whereas calf cannot. A teacher can teach in either primary or secondary education, whereas δάσκαλος denotes someone teaching in primary schools only. What is more, many Greek secondary school teachers (καθηγητές) may find it demeaning to be referred to as δάσκαλοι.

Culture in action

The following information was given on an ice-cream

pot. The literal translation in English serves to demonstrate how different cultures express the same factual information in distinctly different ways in terms of wording, explicitness, amount and focus on different aspects.

French	German	Dutch	Greek
Une cuillère est a votre disposition sous le couvercle de ce pot.	Mit Löffel unter dem Deckel.	Als extra service zit in de verpakking een lepelje.	Στην συσκευασία περιλαμβάνεται κουτάλακι.
A spoon is at your disposal under the lid of this pot.	With spoon under the lid.	As an extra service there is a little spoon in the package.	There is a little spoon in the package.

Pitfalls

Stevick argues that for learners taught in the traditional way, language "remains foreign from the start of the course to its end" (1982: 7). Uncritical use of translation seems to have the same results, albeit starting from the other extreme: learners may be led to expect English to conform to the structure & personality of Greek, or even expect English to be Greek translated word for word. Of course, after a number of frustrating experiences with reality, English will seem more alien to them.

Misconceptions about the true nature of English will result from teachers' providing insufficient, confusing or inaccurate information through translation.

The following table contains some characteristic examples of uncritical use of translation:

interested = ενδιαφέρονται	Learners need to learn the whole phrase: be interested in + object.
raise = αυξάνω, μεγαλώνω	Learners are not helped regarding 'when' and 'how' to use the new word.
well behaved = συμπεριφέρονται καλά	The wrong part of speech is given. What is more, <i>well behaved</i> operates as a single word.
mate = φίλος siblings = αδέρφια	<i>Mate</i> is colloquial, φίλος is neutral. <i>Siblings</i> is formal/technical, αδέρφια is neutral.

Consequently, learners will feel frustrated each time they encounter examples when English does not conform to their misconceptions, and may conclude that English is silly/illogical. The same misconceptions will make it difficult for them to 'crack the code' and understand/ produce natural English. As a result of continuous frustration they may lose interest in learning English.

Following is a list of potential learner problems arising from uncritical use of translation in teaching.

- Misconception that all Greek items have an equivalent in English (e.g. 'How do we say σουβλάκι in English?')
- Misconception that seemingly common items mean exactly the same (e.g. lunch).
- Misconception that English categorises the world in the same way as Greek (e.g. 'My mother is a Professor of Mathematics', when the learner means 'a secondary school maths teacher').
- Misconception that English is Greek translated word

for word. For example, when words are translated with no regard for grammar or collocation learners, will invariably impose Greek grammar/collocations on English (e.g. 'Your son has raised so much', or the notorious 'I want to give for the First Certificate').

- Problems with understanding how English expresses time (e.g. Past Perfect is not Υπερσυντέλικος)
- Problems with identifying different styles, and producing appropriate language (e.g. *mate* does not mean φίλος).
- Risk of appearing to be abrupt / rude (e.g. *What do you want?*). In Greek the use of plural (Τί θέλετε;) and appropriate intonation will make the question a polite one; in English politeness requires different structures/expressions.
- Problems with understanding connotations, and risk of communicating connotations unwittingly.
- Ineffective dictionary use. Learners may believe that any of the English words listed after a Greek entry will do.
- If learners try to decode English in terms of the Greek mentality they will have trouble identifying and interpreting the clues required to understand jokes and political/social commentaries. As a result they may fail to understand or (even worse) may misunderstand word-play and humour.
- Similarly, if learners recreate Greek discourse (in terms of style, explicitness, feel etc.) using English vocabulary the resulting text will seem very odd to a native speaker of English.

The following text, written by a low-intermediate Greek EFL learner, is an example of the learning outcome of uncritical use of translation.

Narcotic! The fear and the death hide in this word. A word like all words from sounds, but provoke shiver.

The narcotic dont's news. Starting from the 60th and arrived today to is one from the serious problems. The people life turn off, every day and they makes to feels a nothing. They make to fear, going away from the light sun and push the dark every day. We read every day for young men, dead from narcotic. This young men they can't to see the beatifull life and they see only the ungliness. I remember, know a narcotic men. In his eyes you can see all dreams but he can't to realize.

All young men must they have eyes open, for to not dangerous.

The most interesting feature of this example is not the imposition of Greek syntax, collocations and idioms on English, but the use of a passionate/pompous tone characterising much of Greek secondary school writing.

PRINCIPLED USES

Fortunately, it is exactly those cases of 'translation impossibilities' which provide EFL teachers with materials through which they can raise learners' awareness of the similarities and differences between English and their

native culture and language (see also Kramersch, 1992: 148).

Translation can be used to help learners ...

- Realise that ways of thinking and expression are influenced (or even constrained) by culture, and see the futility of trying to make English 'fit' their own culture/language.
- Become aware of idiosyncrasies in the two languages, and accept the 'personality' of the English language.
- Realise that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between items in the two cultures/languages.
- Realise that the two cultures/languages may express similar items in different ways (single word, compound, expression).
- Become aware of different registers, and the importance of appropriacy, as learners are much more sensitive to register in their own language.
- Become sensitive to cultural connotations.
- Become aware of the importance of collocation, and realise that the two cultures/languages may have different collocations for 'equivalent' words.

When using translation ...

- Ensure that it is always in context. When learners ask for the English equivalent of a Greek word ask them first to explain in what situation they want to use it and what they want to express.
- Point out relevant cultural elements - it helps learners become more familiar with the language.
- Check that the equivalent is consistent in terms of register.
- Check if words are parts of fixed expressions - and translate the expression, not the word.
- Translate words in frequent collocations - not words in isolation.
- Combine translation with use of visuals (e.g. different types of houses).
- Help learners compare and contrast how the two languages categorise reality (e.g. through teaching lexical sets).
- Point out connotations.
- Point out any differences in shape, content, use etc.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank my colleagues Steven Bower and Nicky Webb for helpful discussion on relevant aspects of the British culture.

2. I have drawn those conclusions based on drawings and comments of teachers on the Cambridge/RSA Diploma and Exam-Prep courses, as well as the

participants of my talk at the 19th Annual TESOL Greece Convention, whom I would like to thank.

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