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Figurative Language in Translation: A Cognitive Approach to Metaphorical Terms

Abstract

My approach to the issues of the translation of figurative terminology is based on the findings of cognitive science about the role of metaphor in language and thought, and my own translation and interpreting experience. The developments in the translation of metaphorical terminology in Latvian show that there is a clear trend to demetaphorise metaphorical terms. However, metaphor plays a constitutive role in framing a concept, it is a basic technique of reasoning that is also manifest in terminology. The replacement of a metaphorical term results in a different, non-metaphorical conceptualization. It is not justified as it severs associations, inhibits the perception and the recognition of the term and hence hinders its back translation and interpreting.

This study aims to have a closer look at the issue of the translation of figurative terms, its theoretical background in Latvia and the emerging challenges in translation and interpreting practice. Advances in cognitive science have made invaluable contributions to the understanding of thought and language in use in all its manifestations (see Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003; Gibbs [1994] 1999; Gibbs 2002; Steen 2002 and many others). Cognitive research has revealed that figurative language is a systematic part of human cognitive processes: these are “metaphors we live by” (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003). Figurative language in general, and metaphor as its most powerful pattern in particular, is a challenging area in translation. A cognitive approach helps

us to understand the significance of abstract thought and abstract reasoning in the formation of figurative terminology, which brings out the role of cognitive theory in translation practice. Figurative terms are part of the conceptual system of a language. In science, metaphorical conceptualization plays a constitutive role in framing ideas and denoting abstract entities¹. The cognitive significance of metaphor in language, including terminology, cannot be overestimated, hence the importance of its preservation in the TL (in this case in Latvian). At the same time, even the recent advanced studies of translation pay little or no attention to the translation of metaphor (see Hatim and Munday: 2004).

Thus, the findings of cognitive science demonstrate that metaphoricity is pervasive in thought and language, which includes the domain of terminology. The question arises why metaphorical terms present serious difficulties in translation. There are a number of reasons. From a cognitive point of view, a metaphorical term reflects a figurative concept, it has a complicated semantic structure with a certain degree of abstraction. Moreover, many terms are phraseological units (PUs), which means that these are stable cohesive combinations of words with a figurative meaning and their own stylistic features². Interestingly, there are more phraseological terms than is commonly suspected. Nikulina calls them terminologisms or terminological phraseologisms. These are “units, which possess terminological and phraseological meaning at the same time”³ Nikulina (2005: 6-7).

Furthermore, there are also psycholinguistic considerations of perception and recognition. It is difficult to define what constitutes a metaphor compared to a literal expression (see Gibbs 2002:

79). Psycholinguistics has shown us that idiomatic multiword units may cause difficulties in identification and comprehension. They have a holistic meaning, they are stored and retrieved whole from memory with their associated meaning and form (see Wray 2002). Problems arise when there is no stored representation in our mind, that is, there is no direct correspondence between the PUs of the two languages. Naturally, the translation of phraseological terms is more difficult than the translation of single words. However, if an international PU exists and an adequate metaphorical loan translation is possible, it will maintain the associations and facilitate the process of translation, securing recognisability, thus avoiding potential L1 interference in back translation.

The semantic and stylistic complexity of a metaphorical term presents objective difficulties, which are true in respect of any language. However, there are also country-specific circumstances. In Latvia, for instance, the translation of terminology is a new area, actually it is as old as the regained independence of Latvia. Moreover, translation always depends on the theoretical tenets of the translator and/or the terminologist. Experience has it that translation of metaphorical terminology into Latvian has proved to be especially difficult due to the theoretical approach, namely, a conventional understanding of terminology. In traditional lexicology terms are considered to be non-figurative, monosemous and stylistically neutral (see *Lingvisticheskiy Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar'* [1990] 2002; Rozenbergs 2005: 184). None of this is true today, it is an old belief. However, the conventional approach persists. The actual translation practice shows that many Latvian translators and terminologists have objections to metaphorical terms, which

results in *demetaphorization*, that is, the loss of metaphor in translated terminology. This causes concern.

A metaphorical term may be lexical or phraseological. Let me start with a lexical metaphor,

e.g. **a lifetime**, which has three translations in Latvian:

1) lietošanas ilgums

e.g. the lifetime of a pressure vessel – spiediena iekārtas lietošanas ilgums;

2) mūžs

e.g. a lifetime warranty (for) – mūža garantija;

3) kalpošanas mūžs

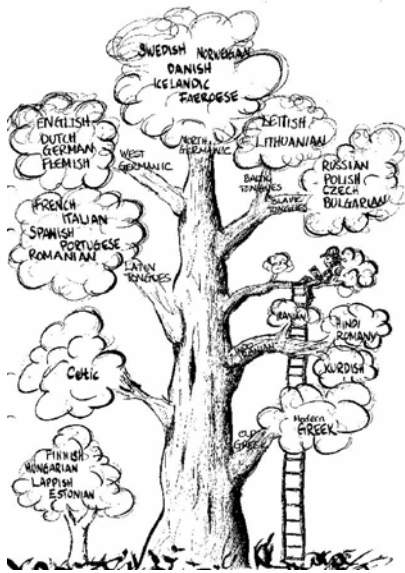
e.g. a lifetime of service (e.g., for goods) – preces kalpošanas mūžs.

Only one of the translations *mūžs* has preserved the original metaphor, it is an adequate loan translation, however, it mostly appears on the internet. The obvious reason is that nobody controls the use of terminology on the internet and nobody prescribes, thus the metaphor has survived. As the example shows, deliberate avoidance of a metaphorical translation results in the emergence of several non-metaphorical variants, which is confusing and bewildering.

Further I will examine a number of phraseological terms and their translation into Latvian. The trend to demetaphorise figurative terms in Latvian translation continues, e.g. in TQM (total quality management) *the process owner* has been translated into Latvian as *procesa direktors* (“the process director”), which is not only a semantic and stylistic loss but it also inhibits comprehension

and causes misunderstandings. Foreign experts do not understand why it is called a director. In accordance with the Latvian terminological thinking, metaphor is not possible in this case, as an owner is someone who owns something that can be bought and sold, and a figurative meaning is not permissible. This is a deliberate attempt to avoid the metaphor “owner” in translation by substituting it by the non-figurative word “direktors” in an effort to “ameliorate” the metaphorical term. As a result of demetaphorisation, the image and the associative link are lost, encumbering the retrieval of the original form of the SL and hence back translation. The question remains why preference is given to a non-metaphorical translation and why it is considered a better language.

Another example. The word *tree* is polysemous. Apart from its botanical meaning, it also appears in numerous phraseological terms⁴, for instance:



1) **a language tree** as a figurative representation of the Indo-European language family. This PU has a metaphorical loan translation in Latvian:

Latv. valodu koks

(Indo-European)

The metaphor has been accepted and it has existed in Latvian for a long time.

2) **a decision tree** –

Latv. lēmumu shēma

(food safety, HACCP)

This PU is new in business language, and the translation in Latvian is a demetaphorised replacement of the metaphorical image *tree* by the word *shēma*, meaning “a chart”.

Metaphor replacement emerges as a regular pattern. When the term is freshly borrowed, it still has a metaphorical equivalent. When it gets to the stage of approval, the metaphor is lost. The absence of metaphor leads to a variety of translations. As there is no single idiomatic equivalent, each field of activity attempts to create their own descriptive variant or variants, e.g.

a flow chart / a flowchart –

Latv. 1) plūsmkarte

(IT)

2) procesu secības diagramma

(food safety, HACCP)

3) aktivitāšu secības shēma

(engineering)

4) - operāciju secības shēma

- maršruta karte

- procesa kalendārais grafiks

(customs)

5) diagramma; grafiks

(State Audit Office – Latv. Valsts kontrole)

This is an example of misguided creativity. Only IT has preserved the metaphor. IT is generally more advanced in using metaphors and accepting metaphorical loan translations, obviously

because IT is an abstract domain and it is a new rapidly developing area. However, the essence of the term *a flow chart* as a unique quality improvement tool and its definition remain the same, in whichever area the tool is applied:

a flow chart –

a drawing that represents a complicated process by using a series of lines to show the different ways in which the process can happen and the different choices you can make

(Macmillan, 2002)

Thus, it should have one single translation. The metaphorical loan is short, clear and precise in contrast to the various descriptive translations.

Let me examine the further development of the translation of the phraseological term *money laundering*⁵. The metaphorical loan translation has been accepted as the official term internationally⁶, including the UN and the OECD. I would like to offer a few translations of this term in the laws of some European countries, including the new EU Member States, for comparison:

Fr. *blanchiment de capitaux*; Ger. *Geldwasche*; Swe. *penningtvätt*; Dan. *pengevask*; Nor. *hvitvasking av penger*; Sp. *lavado del dinero*; Pol. *pranie pieniędzy*; Est. *rahapesu*; Hun. *pénzmosás*; Cze. *praní špinavých peněz*

It is striking that all the other nine new EU Member States have approved a metaphorical loan translation to denote this phenomenon, except Latvia. Latvia is alone in using a definition instead

of a translation: Latv. *nelikumīgi iegūtu līdzekļu legalizācija* (legalisation of proceeds of illicit gains).

The replacement of the metaphor fails to meet the essential requirement of recognisability, which helps to retrieve the loan from long-term memory by associative links. A definition or an oblique periphrastic description severs the associations, encumbers back translation and results in a different, non-metaphorical kind of conceptualisation. The Latvian term *noziedzīgi iegūto līdzekļu legalizācija* is cumbersome, as is seen from the Latvian law on money laundering, e.g.

2. pants. Šis likums nosaka finanšu iestāžu, kredītiestāžu un to uzraudzības un kontroles institūciju pienākumus un tiesības noziedzīgi iegūtu līdzekļu legalizācijas novēršanā, kā arī Noziedzīgi iegūtu līdzekļu legalizācijas novēršanas dienesta (turpmāk — Kontroles dienests) un Konsultatīvās padomes izveidošanas kārtību, šo institūciju pienākumus un tiesības.

3. pants. Šā likuma mērķis ir novērst iespēju izmantot Latvijas Republikas finanšu sistēmu noziedzīgi iegūtu līdzekļu legalizācijai.

A definition instead of a metaphorical term is dysfunctional in practice. It does not lend itself to derivative and phrase formation either. It is not flexible in text, and the translation of the term creates serious syntactic and stylistic problems, e.g. such phrases as *a money launderer, to launder money, an anti-laundering campaign, laundering techniques* etc. present almost insurmountable difficulties for translators and interpreters (especially in simultaneous interpreting). Legal professionals use the metaphorical loan translation in their daily practice while in official situations

they use the approved definition. Eventually this has resulted in two officially approved translations: both the metaphorical loan translation and the non-metaphorical definition, as we can see it from the webpage of the Terminology and Translation Centre⁷, which does not solve the problem:

Šķirkļa nr: 89586		Datubāze: ESTA	Nozare: FI - finanses, nodokļi
LV	naudas atmazgāšana	Statuss:	Apstiprināts Finanšu terminoloģijas darba grupā
	nelikumīgi iegūtu līdzekļu legalizēšana	Statuss:	Apstiprināts Finanšu terminoloģijas darba grupā
EN	laundrying of money		

A metaphorical term easily lends itself to visualisation, and its image may receive a further development in visual representation⁸. A cognitive approach helps to understand the process of creating a mental picture in one's mind and the associations between the visual and the verbal in a multimodal context. Visual representation of metaphorical terms opens up new possibilities of communication that the definition type of translation fails to meet, e.g. an internet article about buying a house and the dangers of money laundering gives the following picture⁹:



The picture evokes the figurative meaning, and we identify the phraseological term *money laundering*. The visual gives a representation, which is beyond the possibilities of any textual discourse. Comprehension requires simultaneous awareness of the figurative and the literal meanings. The link is established, although there is no caption. It is a visual discourse. Identification is secured

due to the inherent features of PUs: stability, figurativeness, and semantic and stylistic cohesion. It is evident that a definition instead of a metaphorical loan translation is also dysfunctional in visual discourse.



In this day and age we cannot do without the internet and multimodal texts, which have become part of our daily life, especially advertisements. For instance, the Bank of New York advertises itself as “a global leader and preferred partner in helping clients succeed in the world’s rapidly evolving financial markets”¹⁰. The internet, however, gives a picture of a laundry machine laundering dollar bills. This is a case of creative visualisation. In the absence of the base form of the PU the picture brings to mind the image of *money laundering* and creates a visual pun, upholding both the figurative and direct meanings. The caption is in Russian: *Новое – это хорошо отмытое старое!* (The new is something old, well-laundered!), which is an instantial replacement of the well-known Russian proverb *Новое – это хорошо забытое старое!* (The new is something old, well-forgotten). This instantiation is an allusion to the PU *money laundering*. The laundry machine is a sub-image, which acts like a recall cue and provides an associative link. Semantic and stylistic ties are established with the PU, although it does not appear in the picture. Thus, metaphorical terms may undergo creative use while there is no possibility of visual representation if a definition or a description is used instead of a metaphorical term.

One of the challenges of dealing with metaphor in translation is the nation's cultural patterns of thought and perception. Culture-specific peculiarities are also manifest in the approach to figurative meaning and stylistic patterns. An attempt to avoid metaphor is an interesting feature of Latvian terminology, especially in legal texts. It may perhaps be explained by a sense of uncertainty whether a metaphorical term will be accepted or understood by the readers, or a belief that the metaphor is not quite a proper choice. This attitude is reflected in inverted commas, which are sometimes used if a metaphor, especially a creative metaphor, is used in discourse, the same refers to metaphorical terms, e.g.

Svarīgi ir saprast, ka **naudas "atmazzgāšanas"** problēma ir aktuāla arī valstīm ar krietni senākām finanšu sektora tradīcijām.

Ik gadu ārzonas firmu skaits palielinās par apmēram 150 000 vienību — pagājušā gs. 70. gados pasaulē bija aptuveni 25 "**nodokļu paradīzes**", bet tagad to skaits ir pārsniedzis 60.

<http://www.delfi.lv/news/comment/comment/article.php?id=10254193>

Globalizācija pavērusi ceļu arī tādām negācijām kā starptautiskais terorisms, narkotiku tirdzniecība, kontrabanda, negodīgā ceļā iegūtas **naudas „atmazzgāšana”** u.c., kā rezultātā tiek izkropļota godīga tirgus sacensība.

<http://www.konsorts.lv>

The use of metaphors in inverted commas appears in texts of all stylistic registers. For instance, the Latvian Police Academy offers a course in Operative Activities, which contains the theme of

money laundering, formulated as follows: *Nelikumīgi iegūtās (“netīrās”) naudas “atmazgāšana”*¹¹. In this phrase “*atmazgāšana*” (laundering) has been put in inverted commas. The name of the theme unexpectedly includes brackets with “*netīrās*” (dirty) in inverted commas too. The reason for double use of inverted commas in an academic context remains obscure unless the author is guided by some objections to metaphors.

I would argue that metaphor in terms is not a redundancy, it cannot be simply discarded. If an adequate loan translation exists, metaphor should not be replaced by a definition or a description, nor should it be placed in inverted commas. Neither is metaphor a drawback, whether it is a conventional metaphor or a creative metaphor. I believe this approach should also be maintained in theoretical research. Cf.:

“Stock words and phrases have several drawbacks¹². Firstly, they are not precise or apposite in many instances; secondly, they may lead to wordiness; thirdly, many stock words and expressions are used metaphorically, possessing or having possessed an emotively expressive function of positive polarity.”

Rozenbergs, *The Stylistics of Latvian*, p. 267

This means that metaphoricity is seen as a drawback. This line of thought surprisingly reminds us of the strivings of English Puritans in the 17th century who argued that scientific prose should be plain, precise, and clear, that “the English prose of scientists should be stripped of ornamentation and emotive language” (Baugh and Cable [1951] 2001: 249).

Another theoretical tenet, which goes against metaphorical loan translations, is a traditional understanding of polysemy. Rozenbergs writes that “lack of precision stems from polysemy” (2004: 58), and that “terminologisms can to some extent be contrasted with polysemous words” (2004: 184). However, if a word or a phrase has a metaphorical meaning, it is polysemous in its own right, namely, it has a direct and a figurative meaning, e.g. a tree – a direct meaning in botany while *a language tree* or *a decision tree* is a metaphor. Is that a drawback? This approach stems from the theoretical premise that the task of a linguist is prescription, as it was in Western Europe in the 17th-18th centuries and also in the 19th century, not description, analysis and interpretation, as it is understood now. Rozenbergs writes that the aim of linguistics, and stylistics in particular, is cultivation of language (p.56), “Linguists are a special category of cultivators” (Rozenbergs 2004: 70), and one of “the obligatory indicators of language cultivation” is its purity (Rozenbergs 2004: 57).

It is obvious that this school of traditional linguistic thought in Latvia fails to account for metaphors in terms. It has strongly influenced the translation of metaphorical terminology into Latvian. However, findings in cognitive science show that figurative meanings are motivated by metaphors that exist as part of our conceptual system (see Gibbs [1994] 1999: 295). This analysis brings out the role of linguistic theory in translation practice. Metaphor is a stylistic technique, which helps to constitute a scientific theory, that is, to reason and convey ideas, hence its role in terminology. Metaphor is a natural phenomenon in terms as it reflects the quintessence of a thought process, it should not be done away with in translation. As it is clear from the few

examples given in this article, an attempt to avoid metaphor results in demetaphorisation and lengthy descriptive translations. It may also result in false friends¹³ or several translation variants, which cause additional problems for translators and interpreters. In all these cases the terminologist has completely forgotten about the daily need for back translation. A conference interpreter (e.g. English-Latvian-English) works like a shuttle, that is, there and back again. Translation is not a one-way street. Unfortunately, the back-again pathway of the process has been largely neglected in Latvian translation practice. In many cases the TL variant does not even distantly suggest the term used in the SL although the language resources are available. The trend has been an ongoing process. I would like to give some of the latest examples. If you saw or heard the term *paredzamā līgumcena* (Articles 7, 8)¹⁴, it would be difficult to establish an associative link with the original term used in the EC directive that is being transposed: *the estimated contract value* (Article 9)¹⁵. Likewise the term *līgumcenu robežas* (Articles 7, 10 of the same Latvian draft law) in no way suggests the EC term *the value of the thresholds* (Article 9.6, 2004/18/EC). The metaphor *threshold* is gone, it has been replaced by a more conventional metaphor *robeža* (border, borderline). The corresponding metaphor *sliksnis* has been obliterated for no obvious reason at all. As a result the translated terms are beyond recognition.

In conclusion, a metaphorical term is not an impermissible deviation, it is not an embellishment either, therefore there is no reason to avoid it. The retention of the SL metaphor is essential in all cases when it is possible. An oblique demetaphorised phrase instead of a metaphorical loan

translation is a pointless impediment in translation practice. Metaphor facilitates perception and recognition both in translation and interpreting, as it reflects a metaphorical concept and therefore it is immediately accessed. It is important to draw “links from metaphorical language to metaphorical thought” (Gibbs 2002: 83). A metaphorical term reflects a figurative mode of thinking. The comprehension of a metaphorical term and its translation is a cognitive act, the same as its creation. The translation of metaphorical terms is an applied skill that needs to be acquired and developed.

Notes

- 1 For the role of metaphor in science see Kuhn [1979] 2002; Taylor [1989] 1995.
- 2 For my understanding of the basic terms of phraseology, see Naciscione 2001.
- 3 Present author's translation.
- 4 The word *tree* has numerous metaphorical meanings in scientific and technical language, see *The Comprehensive English-Russian Scientific and Technical Dictionary* 1997.
- 5 This article is a continuation of the discussion of the loss of metaphor in translation started in Naciscione 2003.
- 6 This PU exists in Europe and beyond as it has a common source. Piirainen has undertaken very interesting cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research of PUs, which occur across a great number of languages. Instead of calling such PUs Europeanisms or internationalisms, she proposes the term *widespread idioms* (Piirainen 2005: 45-75).
- 7 See www.ttc.lv
- 8 For visual representation of phraseological image, see Naciscione 2005.
- 9 See <http://www.pbase.com/image/27029541>
- 10 See <http://www.bramc.ru/cgi-bin/page.pl?docid=54>
- 11 See <http://www.polak.edu.lv/akredpieteikdok/AkreditacijaiGaligaisLatvieshu.pdf>
- 12 Underlined by A.N.
- 13 For false friends in translation see Chamizo Domínguez (1999). Interestingly, he metaphorically calls them mousetraps.
- 14 This term has been taken from the new Latvian Draft Law on Public Procurement, see <http://www.mk.gov.lv/mk/20977/26239.doc>
- 15 DIRECTIVE 2004/18/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 31 March 2004 on the coordination of procedures for the award of public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts, see http://www.minefi.gouv.fr/daj/marches_publics/ppn/ppn-anglais/07_2004-18e.pdf

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