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TRANSLATING MONTESSORI: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The books written by Dr. Maria Montessori along with her pedagogical method are gaining more and more popularity worldwide, and, in order to reach wider audience, they have to be translated to the native language of the respective country they target.

The challenges the translator into Bulgarian faces are significant as most of the books are written in the nineteenth century and their style in some cases could be problematic. In addition, the terminological apparatus of the AMI is not established in Bulgarian and is just now coming into its own due to the increasing number of translated texts. Thus, in many of the cases the option of one-to-one translation is not acceptable and semantic translation has to be used instead. This paper looks into some of the issues that a translator has to overcome and provides examples of some source – target correspondences which have been approved by the AMI.

Maria Montessori, the woman who promoted education from birth and who stipulated that children are the future of mankind and as such all people should heed to their needs by providing the necessary environment for the development of children, was born on 31st August 1870 in Italy. Despite the prejudices of her time, she graduated from the University of Rome where she studied medicine, thus becoming the first woman to have a doctor title. Then she continued her post-graduate studies in the field of psychology, philosophy and education and worked in a medical institution for children with learning disabilities. Her latter experience helped her develop her educational method – the Montessori Method and the materials which she later used with “normal” children. Montessori was greatly influenced by the work of Jean-Marc Itard and Edouard Sequin and she used some of their ideas in order to further her own method based on the natural impulses and the inner drive in children. The first *Casa dei Bambini* (Children’s House) was opened in 1907, and after its success, more Montessori schools were opened all over the world [1].

The books written by Dr. Maria Montessori along with her educational method have been gaining more and more popularity worldwide. Getting access to the original works of Montessori, though, could be difficult for the general public for several reasons: one, because the copyrights of the said books are held by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and are not widely available; two, because many of the texts are in Italian as the main working language of Montessori herself or English when they have been translated by her students or collaborators.

Thus, in order to reach a wider audience, the books have to be translated into to the native language of the respective country, in this case in Bulgarian. The translation process itself is also challenging as the AMI are very careful with the publishing houses that acquire the permission to distribute their books as well as with the translators who get appointed to the task. The AMI assign a reviewer approved and usually trained by them who supervises the translation and agrees on the final version to be published, thus assuring compliance with the beliefs, directives, and general objectives of the AMI.

The challenges the translator into Bulgarian faces are significant as most of the books are written in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century, and their style in some cases could also be problematic even more, so as Montessori herself uses

the language pertaining to the fields of medicine, psychology and education along with Latin terms, proverbs and biblical references as well. Here, in addition to the various reference books, along with the Bible, the rich humanitarian background of the translator is of particular importance.

Apart from the abstruse style, another obstacle that a translator of Montessori has to overcome is rendering the materials developed and used by Montessori in her method to the target language. The main problem stems from the fact that the terminological apparatus of the AMI is not established in Bulgarian and is just now coming into its own due to the increasing number of the translated texts. Many of the materials developed and used by Montessori are unfamiliar for the Bulgarian parent or educator. In many of the cases the option of word-for-word or literal translation is not acceptable and directional equivalence has to be sought instead. To do that, however, the translator has to resort not only to semantic meanings but also to the visual representations of the materials in order to familiarize her/himself with the essence of the material in question.

The goal of this paper is to present a case study on the translation of some of the sensorial materials developed and used by Montessori in her schools, focusing on the equivalents chosen in Bulgarian for them as approved by the AMI reviewer for Bulgaria.

BACKGROUND STUDIES

The process of translation of a text usually involves two domain mapping, i.e. the one of the source text (ST), and that one of the target text (TT). In order for such a mapping to be complete, a transfer of cultural, social and cognitive codes, or supermemes [2], should occur which requires a very good knowledge on behalf of the translator of both cultures. The end result, which is actually a new text, should be well structured and understandable [3, p. 164] and its quality is judged not only based on the accuracy of translation, but also by the feeling one gets that the final product is a text on its own, or the fact that it does not sound as a translation [4, p. 149]. Put in a different way, the final result should be “the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” [5, p. 160] as full equivalence is virtually impossible to obtain [2; 6; 7].

Applied to Montessori texts, all of the above makes even more sense as the TT which in this study is in Bulgarian is a result of a process of transfer of codes from Italian through English to Bulgarian, therefore we really cannot talk of a full equivalence, while in cases we can discuss the resort to literal and free translation or the achievement of “natural” or “directional” equivalence [7, p. 78].

CASE STUDY

The source for this particular case study is the original book by Montessori *The Discovery of the Child* [8] which was published for the first time in 1948 by Montessori-Pierson Publishing company and its translated version [9] published in 2018 by Asenevtsi Trade EOOD. The focus is only on the way some of the sensorial material developed by Montessori is translated into Bulgarian as delving into the whole Montessori terminological apparatus is the subject of a more detailed future study.

The following are some excerpts from the original book in English and their AMI approved translated version in Bulgarian.

Discovery of the child (1948)

1. Material: Solid insets and blocks (p. 170).
2. Each of one of these [blocks] contains ten insets, which are cylindrical in shape, smooth and slippery (p. 170).
3. fitting each piece into its appropriate hole (p. 171).
4. Hole (p. 171).
5. The Blocks (p. 172).
6. We have here large pieces of wood painted in bright colours, in three systems which we call – the system of rods and lengths, the system of prisms, the system of cubes (p. 173).
7. In institutions for defectives, I have used insets of wood consisting of many series of round, coloured plaques (p. 176).
8. Plane Insets and Geometrical Shapes (p. 177).
9. Flat insets of wood (p. 177).
10. Sockets (p. 177).

Да откриеш детето (2018)

- Материал: триизмерни блокове с цилиндри за вгнездяване (p. 164).
- Всеки блок съдържа десет гладки цилиндъра, които [...] лесно влизат и излизат от съответстващите им гнезда (p. 164).
- [...] а след това се прави опит всички да се поставят обратно на правилните им места (p. 165).
- Гнездо (p. 165).
- Дървените фигури (p. 167).
- Те включват три серии от големи, ярко оцветени дървени материали, комбинирани в три системи, които сме нарекли: поредица от летвички и дължини, поредица от призми и комплект кубчета (p. 167).
- В институциите за деца с недъзи, както споменах по горе, използвах дървени рамки за вгнездяване, групирани в редица комплекти от цветни обли плочки (p. 170).
- Рамки и геометрични форми (p. 172).
- Плоските дървени рамки (p. 172).
- Гнезда (p. 173).

DISCUSSION OF THE CASE STUDY

We should open the discussion of the case study by establishing what exactly sensorial material is and what its functions are. As mentioned on the official page of AMI Canada: “The sensorial materials were created to help young children in the process of creating and organising their intelligence. Each scientifically designed material isolates a quality found in the world such as colour, size, shape, etc. and this isolation focuses the attention on this one aspect” [1] thus, the child learns by repeated usage, thereby through experience, rather than by a word of mouth.

Before we delve into the analysis of the suggested examples we should also look into the choice of the term *material* which is retained in Bulgarian as well. Montessori’s materials are actually practical tools she lets the children use in order to obtain skills necessary for their lives. As such the choice of the term in English is quite appropriate as the meaning of the term, especially when it is used in the plural, is “Things needed

for an activity” [10]. In Bulgarian the primary meaning of the term is “1. Вещества или предмети, от които се произвежда нещо; суровини. Строителен материал. (‘Substances or things, something can be made of; raw material. Building material’) while its second meaning is related to education 2. Това, което се преподава или се използва в образованието. Учебен материал. Нагледни материали (‘What is being taught or used in education. Educational material. Aids’)” which makes *material* synonymous to *teaching aids* or *education tools*. Therefore, semantically the choice for one and the same term is governed by slightly different reasons, i.e. in English the focus is on the activity, while in Bulgarian on the educational part.

Then, the material, as described by Montessori, should be presented to the children. The Bulgarian version of the book retains the same verb *презентирам*. The choice of the English *present* is interesting as the meanings of the verb entered in Lexico are “1. Give or award formally or ceremonially. 1.2 Show or offer (something) for others to scrutinize or consider. 2. Introduce or announce the various items of (a broadcast show) as a participant”. Bearing in mind the essence of the material developed by Dr. Montessori and the function of the teacher, who is merely an observer helping children use the apparatus correctly, it seems that the intended meaning is synonymous to *introduce* and *show*. The meanings of the Bulgarian verb *презентира* are more limited, numbering a total of two: “1. Представям пред публика нова стока, изделие или фирма, компания и др.; правя презентация. (‘Present to the public a new item, product or company, etc.; give a presentation’) 2. Банк. Предявявам иск за полица (‘Banking: make a claim for a bill of exchange’)”. As the latter does not fit the field of usage, it is obviously the former that is intended, which, however, has a more commercial connotation in Bulgarian and might sound odd to some educators. Therefore, in this case one could argue that the choice of the Bulgarian variant is not the best possible, however, it might have been selected and established by the AMI reviewer based on the closeness with the English equivalent and the resort to literal translation. The Bulgarian educators would probably consider *показвам* (‘show’) or *въвеждам/запознавам* (‘introduce’) as a better and more familiar option.

Examples (1) and (2) above are cases of free translation where the terminology accepted into Bulgarian by the AMI reviewer does not follow closely the one established in English, but rather uses terms which sound more familiar to the Bulgarian readers while at the same time retaining the idea of the material. In addition, the translated Bulgarian version is also more informative than its English counterpart as *solid insets* does not tell the reader anything else than merely that it is a matter of some firm elements that are put or inserted somewhere. The Bulgarian translation provides the shape of the material, i.e. *cylinder* and the fact that it has three dimensions, in addition to its use, i.e. it is inserted in *a block*. The term which is somewhat awkward for a Bulgarian reader though is *block* rendered and established into Bulgarian as the homonymous *блок*. While the meaning of the English word is “A large solid piece of hard material, especially rock, stone, or wood, typically with flat surfaces on each side”, thus describing the appearance and essence of the container holding the insets, the Bulgarian *блок* “Грамаден къс от нещо много твърдо” (‘A big piece of something very hard’) does not bear the connotation of a rectangular

box-like item. The idea behind the use of the said term is probably similarity with the English one, thereby a case of direct borrowing, however, lexemes, such as *кутия* ('box') or *контейнер* ('container') might have been better suited variants. The choice of the lexeme *box* would have also been determined by the fact that Montessori herself describes the material as resembling "the ordinary receptacle for weights belonging to a balance" [8, p. 171] which in Bulgarian is translated as "обикновен набор от тежести за кантар" ('a regular set of weights for scales') [9, p. 164]. The general reader who is familiar with the mechanic scales remembers the wooden boxes used to hold the weights and would easily visualize the material, while *блок* makes one guess how it looks.

The use of the English *block* as a subheading introducing another type of material, i.e. wooden figures, is an instance of re-occurrence of the same lexeme which can be confusing, e.g. (5). Given the polysemous nature of English words, it should not be strange that there are multiple occurrences of one and the same lexeme with different denotates. Used within a very short stretch of text denoting two different objects, however, it causes confusion which is increased further due to the fact that in the case previously discussed *blocks* refers to container-like structures while in this case to a set of separate wooden figures which are of different shapes – rods, prisms, and cubes. The latter makes the choice of this term for the three sets of figures even more strange as apart from the cubes, the figures do not match the definition of blocks. In this example we can say that the translated version offers a better term for the materials at hand.

Going back to the translation of *solid insets*, it should also be noted that in this particular example, i.e. (1), *insets* in itself does not provide much information on the material. Thus, images of the material along with the additional information in the book itself have been resorted in order to provide further background and assist with the process of translation.

In addition, as can be seen in (2), the term *insets* in the Bulgarian translation is omitted and instead there is a verbal phrase focusing on the movements associated with the use of the cylinders and an adverbial one which describes the place they fit. The latter in Bulgarian is rendered as *гнездо* (lit. 'nest') and this choice of a translation variant is consistent with *вгнездяване* ('to place in a nest') as they share the same root morpheme. The choice of *гнездо* is observed in some other examples and while the English terms in these particular cases are different, i.e. (3), (4) – *holes*, (10) *sockets* in Bulgarian, the term is one and the same and only in (4) it has been replaced with a more general one, i.e. *места* ('places') to avoid repetition within a short span of text, which in Bulgarian is considered a bad style.

Looking at examples (7), (8), and (9) we come across another case of multiple use of one and the same term, sometimes with a pre-modifier, at other times with post-modifier, denoting a different set of materials, i.e. (*flat/ plane*) *insets (of wood)*. Without the assistance of visuals or a wider context one can only guess on the appearance of these materials. The aspects about them which are clear are the fact that they are wooden and probably flat. As the approved and established Bulgarian translation shows, it is a matter of frames used to hold different flat objects of different shapes.

Another set of materials which required the assistance of visuals in order for the correct translation variant to be reached is given in e.g. (6) *the system of rods and lengths* rendered into Bulgarian as *поредица от летвички и дължини* ('a series of laths and lengths'). Here the correspondence between *rod* and *летвичка* is not full, as semantically the former is associated with a bar, or a round stick-like object, while the Bulgarian choice denotes a flat and long lath. The second term is a direct translation of the English *lengths* and it is ambiguous in terms of appearance both in English and in Bulgarian, as length is an abstract notion which cannot be given an exact expression without a particular number attached to it.

Translating a specialised text can pose challenges to the translator, especially, in cases where there is lack of officially established terminology and when it is up to the translated version to do that. In the case of Montessori translations, difficulties arise also from the fact that the translator is working with a target text and not the original one and even though the translated version has been approved by AMI and then offered for translation to Bulgarian, some of the original meaning of the primary Italian text might have been lost in the English version. The characteristic polysemic nature of English words further contributes to the challenges a translator has to overcome as one, term is sometimes used to refer to various materials as shown in the examples above. In order to disambiguate the said use the translator has to resort to visual aids such as pictures as well as further descriptions provided in the book. Probably due to their novelty, the translated Bulgarian versions approved by the AMI appointed reviewer have proven to be more informative and clear to the readers who, in their bigger part, could be assumed to be unaware of Montessori's Method. Thus, although it is a matter of translation of terms which usually allow for one-to-one correspondence, the translator in this case has opted for free translation instead.

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