

# INTRODUCTION TO MUSEUM DISCOURSE

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**Abstract:** Museum texts are embedded in a specific communicative situation that must be considered in their translation as well. As an introduction to the translation of texts in the premises of ethnographic museums, this paper examines basic factors of communicative act model. The author refers to both linguists dealing with cultural translation and to museum practitioners in order to point out and understand features of the current museum discourse. Examples taken from British and Eastern Slovakian museums illustrate the need for an interactional museum providing the visitor with interpretive texts.

**Key words:** interactional museum texts, translation, contextual factors, setting, audience, message, interpretive labels

## Introduction

This article is a starting step in exploring a special field of translation that refers to ethnographic and historical museum exhibitions. Our aim is to outline the features and purposes of museum texts, more specifically the features of exhibition labels. In order to lay the foundation for understanding the nature of exhibit labels, it is crucial to define basic terms and draw the contextual frame within which we will be able to recognize the examined type of text as a well-defined genre. The current museum discourse represents a complex cross-cultural space that in the current world of global mass culture should strive to gain the favour of its visitors and to communicate the value of the heritage in a variety of interactional ways. Any type of text is embedded in a communicative situation; therefore, its form is influenced by several factors that constitute the given situation and must be considered in translation as well. E. Andrews and E.A. Maksimova use the Communication Act Model (CAM) for explaining the process of cultural translation. CAM includes six factors, commonly mentioned also in other models of verbal communication: author, audience, message, context, code and channel (2010). Each text contains a message that is delivered to the audience, either in writing or speaking, by the author in certain context, using a code (language) and a channel (medium). The translator becomes a mediator of the source text to the audience belonging to another culture, and it is her-his awareness of the above given CAM that might either enhance or hamper cross-cultural understanding mediated by translation.

## 1 Setting

The first contextual factor that will be examined here is setting, i.e. the ethnographic museum itself. The main focus will be placed on its origin and functions. MacGaffey (In: *Translating Cultures*, 2003, p. 249-261) provides the information on the origin of ethnographic museums in Western Europe in the mid nineteenth century and explains the status of the first exhibits that were collected in colonies. Curious exhibits were accompanied with commentaries, explanatory and descriptive texts provided by Anthropology, which was at that time a newly coined social discipline that studies humans' past and present from social, biological, historical and even linguistic perspectives. Nevertheless, the exhibited objects, for example, from Africa and Oceania, were considered mere decorative objects deprived of deeper meaning. They were even considered as "demonstrations of the absence of civilisation among those who produced them". In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century folk art of own

collective authors entered western museums and galleries and for some time was considered finer and superior to the folk art brought from other continents. Some authors considered “our folk art” a representation of a cultural heritage of a nation and “their folk art” (often labelled also “primitive” or “tribal” art) “the unthinking representational habits of the tribe” (Ames 1977, In: MacGaffey, 2003). Attitudes to colonial exhibits have changed recently and even their return to the original cultures has been suggested. Ethnographic museums in Slovakia represent a cultural heritage of Slovaks or other nationalities living on the territory of the country. I dare say that nowadays an important function of the museums in Slovakia is not only to inform about the past but also to teach Slovaks to take interest in their culture and history in order not to lose the sense of roots and continuation.

When talking about the function of the museum some authors use the term *translation*, by which they do not mean translation of museum texts into other languages but rather translation of the meaning that the exhibited objects used to carry in the past real life into the meaning delivered to the current visitor by the museum. K. Sturge (2006) claims that in the postcolonial period the message translated by the museum by means of the artefacts selection, arrangement and textual labelling has become dubious and a lot of unsettling questions have arisen. Museums often enhance the legitimization of the colonialists’ quests and unfairly present the way of life of original cultures as a primitive one. Translation of the message is a key concept also for the translator into a foreign language as he/she needs to understand what the overall strategy of a specific museum to the presentation of the heritage is like.

## 2 Audience

The audience reading translated museum texts are the visitors of the museum who are at the same time the visitors of the country. If travelling is to have a deeper sense than just spending a pleasant leisure time on the beaches and in hotels and shopping malls, host countries should provide opportunities for learning about their cultures. Despite the competition of modern communication technologies, museums still play an irreplaceable role in presenting and telling about the heritage. Among other tasks, current museums should search for and apply new presentation ways and techniques that would appeal to a current visitor, such as computer exhibits, information kiosks and Personal Digital Assistants. This is not only technology that can support interactivity in the museum and enable the audience experiential learning and discussion. C. Heath and D. vom Lehm (2009) give examples of interactive presentation provided by the new British Galleries at the V&A in London, where visitors have a chance to do things and cooperate with other visitors at the same time, for example, when putting the pieces of the replica of the Crystal Palace together, when trying on a corset or when exploring a ceramics display together – touching the ceramic pieces, discussing the feeling and relating samples to the originals in the display case. The V&A visitor can also watch short videos that illustrate the use and function of the exhibited objects, e.g. of a washstand designed by W. Burges. (In: R.Parry (ed), 2009, p.266-280) The V&A consider the needs of different age groups of visitors and offer learning programmes to different age school groups, to adults, families, young people, etc. The quotation from an article written before the V&A’s major changes points out some of the benefits that the audience can experience:

We want to create galleries which are beautiful and welcoming, a place for enjoyment and learning. For such a large museum space, we strongly believe that variety is required, with changes of pace and presentation. Some displays will offer grand, elegant spaces, others will invite the visitors to look closely at a single intriguing object, or to enjoy a dense display of, say, tea-caddies or

mezzotints. Atmospheric and glamorous displays will give free reign to the imagination of visitors, as perhaps in a recreation of the Norfolk House Music Room as a space into which visitors can enter, and where, occasionally, they might enjoy live music, as its original occupants did in the 1750s (N Humphrey, 1998).

### 3 Message and Meaning

The message and meaning of any communicative act is both contextual and interactional. It is the recipient who assigns a meaning to utterances and texts, relying on his/her knowledge and experience. We can hardly speak of a universal and objective meaning even if referring to seemingly objective museum communication. Museum visitors are influenced by a whole series of personal factors through which they process the meaning of each exhibit as well as by the way the museum translates the original meaning into an exhibited one. Thus, the visitor provided with the overall arrangement of the exhibition, with the way a specific exhibit is displayed as well as with the texts presented either on the theme panels or labels, reaches his/her own understanding and creates his/her own meaning. The museum hopes to mediate the referential meaning of the exhibits, but quite often does not facilitate a decoding process in an appropriate way. For example, in the Museum of the Šariš Region a comprehensive collection of interesting objects related to medieval guilds is displayed. The exhibit label claims that the objects were used as *cechové tabuľky*, in English translation as *guild figures*. The information provided by the label is not sufficient in Slovak and is even more confusing in English as the translation does not refer to the original meaning of the object at all. S. Holečková (online) provides the following explanation of the function of the above mentioned object:

Cechové zvolávacie tabuľky slúžili na zvolávanie všetkých členov cechu na cechové schôdze. Dokazovali legitimitu, právo cechmajstra ako zákonne voleného predstaveného cechu. Tabuľka zároveň znamenala, že osoba, ktorá sa ňou preukazuje je hodnoverná. Niekedy bola so schránkou na uloženie správy.

The use of a meaningful explanatory text would make the exhibits (*cechové tabuľky*) more attractive and would withdraw them from the anonymous mass of the past objects lacking their history.

### 4 Translator

The translator is a cultural mediator who mediates the communication between two language communities via a translated text. The term cultural mediator is explained by David Katan (1999: 7 – 15), who stresses the importance of translators' awareness of "their own cultural identity". Katan also provides a vision of interpreters and translators entering the communication process among members of different cultures in a more active way. Their knowledge of both the source and the target culture will make them "specialists in negotiating understanding between cultures". (ibid. 12) Although Katan refers primarily to interpreters, the notion of an active cultural mediator can be applied to translators of museum texts, too. The awareness of cultural mediation prevents from considering label texts mere descriptors of exhibits and enhances the importance of readers (visitors), their experience, expectations and cultural background. Nevertheless, a specific aspect of the museum texts translation should be considered. What translators have at their disposal is a source text whose meaning should be mediated to the reader of the target text. While each translator faces a difficult task of

bridging two different cultures, the task of the museum texts translator is even more difficult as her/his translations into English are intended for an international audience, with many of them being non-native speakers of the target texts. The question is to what extent the translator should strive to write the text comprehensible to native speakers of the target language and to what extent he/she should consider the needs of the visitors for whom English is the language mediating communication with other non-native cultures (non-native meant from the perspective of native English speakers.)

The translator is to think about the heterogeneous target readership when selecting the appropriate translation solutions on individual language levels. For example, traditional Slovak houses in southern Slovakia used to have roofs made from straw. Although the Slovak phrase *slamená strecha* is often translated into English as *a thatched roof*, when considering the international audience in the museum, the literal translation *straw roof* seems to be more effective than a given cultural equivalent. Moreover, the English *thatched roof* does not quite correspond to the Slovak *slamená strecha* on the referential level either, as the materials used in building traditional roofs in Britain were not limited to straw.

Another example shows a potential danger of using a specific word in the target language as an equivalent of a more general descriptive phrase in the source language. *Lekárska taška* or *doktorská taška* are Slovak phrases naming a bag that doctors use for carrying their basic utensils. If a bag used by a doctor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been preserved, it might become a museum exhibit. The most natural phrase in English for such an object is *doctor's bag*. A diligent translator searching for a more precise term might come across the words *portmanteau* and *Gladstone bag*, which were both used to name bags of the same appearance and function that the exhibited object used to fulfil. The museum visitor would understand the meaning of the word *portmanteau* as it would occur as part of the label text close to the object; nevertheless, it might distract and hamper the reader's comprehension. In such cases a straightforward translation seems to be a more reader-friendly strategy.

The final example concerns both lexical and syntactical levels. A sentence from a museum panel text about the history of fire brigades in Slovakia describes the process of the formation of fire and rescue service in the following way:

*Do roku 1893 novozaložené mestské a dedinské hasičské zbory sa združovali do väčších celkov, zväzov.*

A feasible option of translating the process expressed by the verb *...hasičské zbory sa združovali* could be *...fire brigades merged to form bigger units, associations*. As the verbal phrase *merged to form bigger units* might be incomprehensible for a non-native reader, a more explicit translation is suggested *fire brigades joined and formed bigger units, associations*.

## 5 Channel

Panels and labels are usually written in a strictly neutral objective way although they are vocative texts that should strive to catch the readers' attention and make them stop. The visitor often wishes not only to learn more about the exhibits but also to think about the past and its links to the present time. McKay (2011) uses the term exhibition labels in a broad sense for any informative text displayed in museum or galleries. The text provided can be brief and include just the title and the name of an artist, or it can be interpretive and provide the information that is "meaningful and relevant to the visitors". Museum labels are short texts heavily loaded with culture, containing both explicitly named cultural entities and hidden cultural implications. Therefore, cultural transposition is often applied. An interpretive approach to museum and galleries exhibitions, and specifically to thoughtful label texts, helps

the visitor understand and enjoy history and cultural and historical heritage. B. Serrell, a renowned expert of museum labels writing, claims that when teaching at workshops she ceased to teach about “words on labels” and started to teach about words as “part of whole exhibitions” ( 1996, p. xi). This claim speaks quite eloquently about the importance of the verbal part of museum exhibitions.

## Conclusion

The provided experience and ideas about basic factors of communication in the current museum show that the museum discourse is a complex institutional space with the potential for addressing its visitors. If translators are to manage translation of museum texts into a foreign language, they need to be aware of the growing importance of the interactional function of museums, of a specific nature of the audience visiting museums and reading translated texts and above all, of the envisaged mission of museums as up-to-date cultural institutions.

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