

THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN THE PRODUCTION OF ADVERTISEMENTS

One of the phenomena which has most contributed to the transmission of values and ideas is advertising. Whenever we open a magazine or a newspaper, turn on the TV or walk in the streets, we are confronted with the power of advertisements. The social setting in which advertising exists today has been present from the very beginning of the century: mass-produced goods, a market target reached through mass media and a competitive professional trade. What is the purpose then of such a social phenomenon? Basically, the final aim is to sell something, either a product, a service or an image. However, there are other secondary functions, such as those that Lund summarizes early in this century (Lund 1947, *Newspaper Advertising*. New York: Prentice Hall: 83): he considers that adman's task to attract attention, to arouse interest, to stimulate desire, to create conviction and to get action from the consumer, or, in publicity terms, the target.

In today's world, this question of the target has undergone a significant change since, although there are specific target groups for each product, the prevailing trend is towards the globalization of markets. Nowadays, it is in fact the language factor one of the elements having more effects on the market and communication strategies. The technological advances in the mass media and the internationalization which defines today's market trends lead to a more universal culture than in previous decades. This globalization of communication encounters some obstacles when exporting the value systems of the different cultures and therefore when dealing with language differences. Translation is one way of overcoming these differences. But what is the actual role that translation plays in the business world and, more particularly, in the process of production of advertisements?

Marketing strategies have lately become very complex. To sell is not enough. What is important is to sell the company's product to as many customers as possible worldwide. In the decades of the 70s and the 80s, management scholars realized that culture and language were outstanding issues which were not dealt with in the field. As a consequence, much more attention was paid to the perception that the audience showed at an advertisement. What they often found out was that this understanding of the message was very much a question of cultural differences, and amid these of communication failures due to either a wrong decipherment of the visual aspects contained in the ad or to linguistic misunderstandings. This was especially relevant in the case of a multinational group, which offers its services in different countries. This implies that they may encounter not only different customs but also different languages.

If it is a multinational company the one that launches a campaign, they need to design a strategy in order to reach other international markets. The first consideration marketing managers

make is concerned with the power of their domestic campaign in a transnational framework, that is, to standardize it worldwide. This is the case of companies such as Levi's or Coca-Cola. The decision about whether to translate the advertisement or not is a varied one. Many of them do not translate the texts and the sale results are excellent, but most of them do translate them, of course it also depends on the type of product and on the regulations of the country in which the product is advertised. Other times, although the text is translated, they fail in presenting visual elements which appear foreign to the audience. For example, nobody could believe that the children in the TV commercial for the German "Kinder chocolate" look at all like our Spanish children. Another variety that a company may choose is to adapt their universal campaign to local markets. The conceptual background for the advertisement remains the same but the rest of the features satisfy the local conditions. This strategy takes into account the particularities of each market as regards the presentation of the ad, the beliefs, behaviour and manners of the specific culture, but the main topic of the campaign remains the same everywhere. However, the question as to translate the message or not is quite specific. A third strategy, to advertise the product by means of different alternatives for the various intended markets, is very often applied when the use, presentation and perceptions of the product are peculiar to each market. This is the case of coffee or tea. The failure of a campaign that tried to impose the massive use of instant coffee in Spain, Italy and France is a well-known case.

As we can withdraw from these brief descriptions of the different strategies that advertisers adopt, it seems that the role of translation understood as a way of intercultural communication is a relevant one for marketing experts. However, during the production stage of advertisements, it is far from occupying a central position.

The nature of the source-text (ST) that is to be translated is the first question that arises when analysing the translation process. An advert is of an intricate formal structure in which words are usually accompanied by other visual and oral elements or by particular typesetting features. Such a formal complexity makes the source text a nightmare for any translator, who would constantly have to take decisions. However, the translator is not free to choose, there are several constraints which affect his / her choice. Gideon Toury, a translation scholar, following some studies in social psychology and in sociology and applying them to the field of literary translation, points out the existence of intersubjective factors which he calls *norms* (Toury 1980: 51). He defines the concept as follows (Toury 1980: 51):

the translation of general values or ideas shared by a certain community — as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate — into specific performance-instructions appropriate for and applicable to specific situations, providing they are not [yet] formulated as laws. These instructions, the norms, are acquired — even internalized — by individual members of the community during the socialization process, and may be said to serve as criteria, in comparison with which actual instances of behaviour are evaluated or judged by the group as a whole and by its members individually.

Toury also distinguishes among several groups of norms depending on the stage at which they operate. One group is what he designates as *preliminary norms*. These interest us in so far as they operate before the translation process. They have to do with the choice of what is going to be translated, and with all the extralinguistic aspects determining the translation, questions such as what is the intended role of the translation, who orders the translation, or what are the reasons for the commissioner to decide to translate or not. This concept of the commissioner of a translation has been coined by the German scholar Hans Vermeer as part of his well-known *skopos* theory. According to him, the *skopos* is “*the aim or purpose of a translation*” and this aim and “*the mode of the translational action is negotiated with the client who commissions the task of the translator.*” (Vermeer 1992: 173). The *skopos* of the translation coincides, in the case of advertisements, with the *skopos* of the source text being that to sell the intended product or service to the addressed target.

We will concentrate then on these extralinguistic factors which may modify the action taken by a translator by means of the description of a general outline about the advertising process. This outline will provide some answers to the questions we have already formulated. The first key element in the production of adverts is the company which intends to sell the product, and which is the ultimate commissioner of the translation. The marketing department together with the sales department are in charge of the general plan of marketing. In this plan there will also be involved some specific managers and the advertising experts. These experts would either contract the services of an agency and then collaborate with them in the development of the campaign, or create their own campaign. Nowadays, competition has made most companies require the service of a multiservice agency which contacts with the advertising agency, the media and any other expert that may be needed. First of all, the marketing department decides which group of potential customers is going to be the target of the campaign, the costs, and the countries where they intend to launch it. When the market pre-test has already been done, they contact with the advertising agency. Within the organization of the agency, it is the creative group the one which interests us, since they have the responsibility of designing a successful advertisement and the source text of the translation according with the goals commissioned by the client.

Among the different professionals who are involved in the creation of the ad, there is usually some expert in written communication who works together with designers and artists. So far, the process receives a detailed revision on the part of the marketing managers of the customer. The result is what we call an advertisement, a TV commercial or a billboard. The marketing managers of the agency have the task of choosing the media in which to advertise their product and also the programming of the campaign. As in the case of a translator, advertising planning is also a decision-taking process. All the decisions should be integrated within the general plan of marketing and they are profoundly affected by external factors. There are certain legal restrictions concerning the use of mass media and designs as well as regards linguistic matters. Another restriction is that imposed by customers. The whole campaign will depend on the intended target, on their motivations and on the correct comprehension of the

message. The last factor is that of the competence. Depending on the prevailing trends of the moment, publicity experts will employ one kind of tactics or another.

However, the decisions about translation are only negotiated by the client and the translator, after Vermeer's suggestions, in a few cases. Although translation is employed almost every day in international campaigns, it happens to occupy a minor position in the whole process. It is usually the advertising agency that contacts the translator of the message and who gives him / her information about the advertisement. Luis Bassat, who is the President of the group of the communications agency *Bassat, Ogilvy & Mather* and an acknowledged person in the field of advertising, gives a detailed account of how creativity should be present in the whole process and of how slogans should be adequately addressed to the already defined target. His recommendations about the slogan are summarized as follows: it should be *corto y memorable, profundo y brillante, simple y único, impactante, perdurable, creíble y relevante* (Bassat 1994: 127). The last adjectives imply that the commissioner also provides some kind of internal norms which would also modify the action of the translator, as Theo Hermans defines:

Norms allow the translator who is faced with a contingent, unpredictable and potentially destabilizing input — the Source Text — to reduce the number of potential solutions for this array of translational problems by adopting only those solutions suggested by the norm as being likely to result in a Target Text that accords with a given model, and thus with a certain notion of correctness, and hence with the values and attitudes that lie behind these models and correctness notions. (Hermans 1991: 164-165)

In fact, a translator of a slogan, when commissioned the task, would take into account, among others, the suggestions on the part of the client. If a slogan has to be credible and relevant, as Luis Bassat points out, its translated version should also keep these features.

R. N. Wetz, who founded years ago *Spectrum Multilanguage Communications* has occasionally showed a great interest in the field of translation especially when concerning slogans. In one of his interviews, he says that *advertising slogans often present the most difficult translation problems and are, hence, most often subject to hilarious errors* (Wetz 1990: 53) and he then suggests several reasons for these *hilarious errors*. One of them is that people who translate are not qualified in the language and the customer does not speak the language so that he cannot judge the translation. An example of this lack of proficiency is the slogan used by a food company to advertise its giant burrito as 'burrada' which in Spanish means 'a big mistake'. Another possible reason which may have its origin in the first one is that of typography mistakes. This takes place particularly with the accent of words like 'año' in Spanish. Wetz refers to the example of a French company that runs a line of river tours in Paris which translated their slogan to different languages. The Spanish text contained an unfortunate mistake saying 'todo el ano', which means 'all the anus' instead of 'todo el año' meaning 'all the year'.

Even worse, very often accurate translation is sacrificed for economic reasons. Advertisers commission the translation of a slogan to any person who has some knowledge of the language and who can use the dictionary. Afterwards, they count the number of words and they pay

the work accordingly. Other times, in order to minimize the expenses the agency uses translation to negotiate the contract with the client. They agree to produce the text already translated and it is the staff of the agency who translates the text. In 1991, Yuri Radziewsky, who heads another multilingual marketing communications agency *YAR Communications* in New York, defended the idea that anybody who intends to sell its products overseas should have knowledge of the culture and tongue of the target market. He also suggests to *avoid word-for-word translation. Effective translation involves the processing of ideas, not words* (Kapp 1991).

These are not only Radziewsky's views but also other scholars are just beginning to reconsider the role of translation not only in advertising but also in business communication. The globalization of markets finds serious difficulties when encountering cultural and language obstacles. An illustration of this is what is happening in Europe; while on the one hand, trading barriers are disappearing, on the other hand, a strong movement of national self-awareness has settled in the different countries of the Union and we find that translators are more required in any transnational event in Europe. However, translation is still an undervalued matter especially in advertising. Although there is a long list of advertising blunders due to this question, as far as everyday practice is concerned, there seems to be no feedback between advertising managers and translators and, if there is some, it usually takes place at a very final stage of the advertising process. This contradicts the principle of Total Quality which applies to the other activities within companies nowadays. This lack of attention to the translation component in advertising leads us to think that it is not integrated in the overall communication policy of the company. Translation is perceived as a rather mechanical procedure which may be carried out by any person who agrees to finish the work 'by yesterday'. At least, it is quite a promising sign to find some references to the issue of translation in international management conferences and in marketing and publicity books. As Bassat states after a long and successful career, *traducir requiere un esfuerzo diez veces mayor que el de hojear un diccionario*.

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