

Original texts and their translations in a postmodern society

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1. INTRODUCTORY

The aim of this study is to analyse two types of original text, advertising texts for everyday use and cultural texts, i.e. concert programmes, and their translations as produced in Finland. As Finland is a bilingual country, many documents and texts of a more official nature are written in both official languages, Finnish and Swedish, or are translated from one to the other. This article, in which the languages and illustrations are analysed, and also the message and the empty spaces, is based on work done within a project called *The Process of Translating*, started at the Department of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Oulu in 1989. How do these texts produced in at least two languages work in a postmodern society? Who are their recipients? Answers to such questions are sought by an «archaeological» method, the texts being considered as functional wholes from a psycholinguistic point of view.

2. HOW TO STUDY TEXTS IN A POSTMODERN SOCIETY

The steps in the work can be compared with those pursued by the archaeologist. Everything is of importance and should be observed and described at the outset without any selection being made. The material is authentic and has not been studied before in a systematic way, and so it must be approached on its own conditions, i.e. it is the authenticity and subjectivity of the material in the original and in the translated version that provide the starting point for the analysis and discussion. The present analysis is also inspired by semiotics, especially from Eco's (1976, 7) point of view: «Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie.» The texts cannot be characterized as «normal» material.

Texts of any kind whatsoever live a life of their own in the postmodern society, for it is a human writer who has produced them. But what is the postmodern? Lyotard (1992, 21) gives the following answer: «It is undoubtedly part of the modern. Everything that is received must be suspected, even if it is only a day old...» Postmodernism is dynamic and constantly changing. At the same time, the choices that have to be made are dependent on power, especially marketing power. «Striving for more may or may not be inherent in the human character, but modern advertising has been carefully designed to increase consumer desire», Richins states (Richins 1996, 125). When taking the postmodern into account, it also means being critical and showing a tolerance of alternatives. Texts of marginal literary value, as in the present material, have not often been considered worth studying. Cheap products give as relevant and interesting material for analysis as the most expensive ones, however (Kuusamo 1990, 167). This material is also easy to obtain and study, as Berger (1991, 68) points out. He has studied commonplace matters and is ready to acknowledge the symbolic meaning that can be contained in

them (Berger 1997, 6). Everyday texts ("the cheap ones") must also be studied if one is to accept this point of view.

3. ANALYSIS

The texts for everyday use and cultural texts considered here were mostly written originally in Finnish and then translated into Swedish, or in a very small minority of cases into English. With these texts as my object of interest, I made an experiment with a group of 20 students of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Oulu. They had studied Swedish for 6 years at school and for 2-3 years at the university and were well acquainted with both types of the text, having received advertisements free of charge directly to their homes (about 30 kilogrammes a year) and having visited concerts with varying frequency and therefore bought concert programmes. During my lecture dealing with stylistics and translation, two texts representing the two types of material were first shown on the screen, and after a discussion in the classroom the students were asked to write down their reactions.

Advertising texts. – The above experiment was performed with Finnish-speaking students in order to study the human reactions to the language, message and illustrations of the texts. The students wrote their answers and reactions in Swedish (L2). The main results were as follows. The students as consumers do read texts of these kinds in some way. Only a few throw them directly into the waste-paper bin. Some of them are irritated at receiving them and do not want to look at them or read them at all. Most of the students' comments deal with the language in a manner that is quite in accordance with what they learn in their language studies at university. They often compare the Finnish texts with the Swedish ones, and particularly specialized Finnish words with their Swedish equivalents. That is a way in which they can become more accustomed to contrasting the two languages functionally.

Bilingualism is mostly looked on as a favourable aspect of life in Finland, as something very valuable for the people as a whole, but there were also some students who criticized the bilingual advertising texts because they could not find any functional or natural bilingualism in them. The parallel texts sounded unnatural and artificial according to them. It was sometimes the bilingual text that causes irritation, the readers feeling the translated parts to be simplistic or even ridiculous.

As for the language of the advertising texts, it must be pointed out that their form of language consisting of isolated words and constructions was lacking in more complicated syntactic structures. Nouns, adjectives and numerals were the most frequently used word classes, and the words had been transferred literally (word for word) into the other languages. The numerals, being copied directly, play a certain role in the texts. Their aim is to make the consumers to realize how cheaply they can buy the products that are being advertised.

What kinds of information did the advertising texts give? There were three visual types of information in these texts: written material, pictures (photographs, drawings etc.) and empty parts in these texts. The advertising texts as a whole were informative and functional, having a clear purpose. The pictures, on the other hand, could also be seen as non-functional, as the products (coffee, bread, butter, eggs etc.) were very well-known to everybody.

Cultural texts. – The students commented on the concert programmes in almost the same way as on the advertising texts, paying attention most often to the pictures, especially the photographs. They liked to look at these, because they wanted to see even before the concert began what the artists looked like. During the actual concert they preferred to concentrate on

the music rather than the programme. They also liked the bilingual texts, although some of them were irritated at the fact that the Finnish was printed in larger type than the Swedish. The students compared the Finnish texts (and words) with their Swedish equivalents in order to learn new terms in music. The language of the concert programmes was also quite simplified, especially on the front page, which carried information about the concert, its place, time etc., whereas the information about the artist(s) and composer(s) was written in more complicated language.

4. DISCUSSION

The aim here was not to define the material beforehand, i.e. to choose only «the finest» texts, or to restrict it in any way. The text, whatever it might be, the different languages used, the illustrations and the empty parts are all important ingredients of this entity, which we experience from morning to night every day as we are working, resting, eating etc., or enjoying our free time, e.g. at concerts.

The language of the texts (original and translation) can in general be characterized as highly functional in the context of a postmodern society, but this is not always so clearly in evidence in all cases. The naturalness and authenticity of the material were features of crucial value when analysing this new material (*terra incognita*) such as it might appear as part of our everyday lives.

5. REFERENCES

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