

Homophonic Translation as Humpty-Dumpty's Choice

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Abstract. The article considers mechanisms of sense formation in the course of receptive speech activity and deformation of the source text meaning as a result of intentional receptive distortion in the course of auditory perception. Homophonic translation termed *soramimi* is discussed as a product of audial perception, as a carnivalized text and as a result of an interpretative strategy of cognitive dissonance alignment. We hereby address the auditory modality from the viewpoint of its inherent potential for misinterpretation, both intentional and unintentional. The perceptual phenomena are viewed through addressee's strategies of realizing the semantic potential of the target text across several languages.

1 Introduction

Soramimi – homophonic translation of song lyrics from one language into another – represents a vast corpus of material for the study of audial perception. A burlesque genre of *soramimi* (空耳) entered the Japanese culture through Tamori Club television show. Buffalaxing, the English counterpart of *soramimi*, stands for creating comic videos based on the initial clip in a foreign language by introducing English subtitles imitating phonetic patterns of the source text. Buffalax videos are parodic versions of videoclips, animated cartoons, television programs or musical compositions created in a foreign language.

The general gamification of present day culture brings the *soramimi* genre to the forefront of public attention in different parts of the world. The world-famous song “Michelle” (“Beatles”, 1965), contains a refrain in French: “Sont le mond qui un très bien ensemble, très bien ensemble”, which has been humorously rendered in English as “Someday monkey gone, play piano song, play piano song”. The examples, which are well known in Russia, include the following fragments of world-famous popular songs: “Mal’chik khochet v Tambov” (“The boy wants to get to Tambov”) - deformed refrain of “Tic-Tic-Tac” by Brazilian group “Carapicho”, “Sto balerin” (“One hundred ballerinas”) – “stumbling in” (Chris Norman); “Vladislav” (a popular Russian name) – “What is love?” (Alexander Haddaway). Such parodic carnivalized texts are created by and addressed to naïve language users.

2 Methods and material

The material for the research is represented by the fragments of authentic poetry and song lyrics selected from English, French and German on-line editions of

free access. The theoretical-methodological approach to the study is based on the integration of key hypotheses of conceptual analysis, componential analysis and interpretation method, as well as fundamental theses of general cognitive theory of translation.

As a language material, *soramimi* may be considered within the context of at least three oppositions: as oral speech (contrasted to graphically fixed text), as a negative language material (unlike positive language material) in terms suggested by L.V. Shcherba, and as a secondary text – the text created by the addressee as opposed to the primary text created by the addressor.

3 Soramimi is mishearing: the right to choose the meaning

Quasi-mishearings, as well as true mishearings, provide a substantial body of informative material, which is instrumental in reconstruction of the addressee's individual picture of the world. Ludic nature of *soramimi* demonstrates its relation to *mondegreens* – misinterpretations of poems or song lyrics, with both the original and the *mondegreen* versions being in the same language. It is quite difficult to draw a line between mishearing per se as a distortion of audial perception and *soramimi* as a kind of language game. Z. Freud emphasized the difficulty in delineating these phenomena: “We know a lot of people who find pleasure in intentional distortion of harmless words turning them into obscenities; this is deemed ingenious, and indeed we often have to ask a person, from whom we hear such word, whether he made a joke on purpose, or it was a slip of the tongue” [1].

Not infrequently a certain constituent of the mental space of the message proves to be outside the cognitive base of the receptor and thus becomes the pivot point for the lack of understanding, which human conscience is

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struggling to accept. The addressee finds a different sign to substitute for the obscure fragment, and, through game strategies, adds more signs to it, thus making it an integral text, which semantically has nothing in common with the source text, but is very close to it phonetically and metrically. A phonological pattern of soramimi combines signatures of the source text and recognizable features of the target language phonetics.

Carnivalized texts are intentionally created and are quasi-mishearings, that is to say they could well be true mishearings and are partially built on them. The popularity of such books as “Mots D’Heures: Gousses, Rames” published in 1967 by Luis d’Antin van Rooten is indicative of the interest towards the process of homophonic translation. This book is a collection of verses written in Old French and simulating phonetic structure of the English folklore nursery rhymes (“Mother Goose’s Rhymes”).

Humpty Dumpty Sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty Had a great fall. And all the king’s horses And all the king’s men Couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty Together again.	Un petit d’un petit S’étonne aux Halles Un petit d’un petit Ah! degrés te fallen. Indolent qui ne sort cesse Indolent qui ne se mène Qu’importe un petit d’un petit Tout Gai de Reguennes.
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Listening to the French version, one gets an impression of hearing the speaker reciting the poem in English with exaggerated French accent. Such carnivalized texts are soramimi – an artificially created analogue of mondegreen, which is an unintentional mishearing.

As the very possibility of multiple interpretations is inherent to the text itself, the addressee is no less entitled to attribute meaning to the text than the addressor. Humpty-Dumpty’s rule: “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less” holds true for the receptor: “When I hear a word it means what I choose it to mean”.

4 Soramimi à la Française

Buffoonish, a parodic interpretation of song lyrics and poetry, has a long-standing tradition in the French language and culture. The late XVIII century parody to the French Republic anthem “La Marseillaise” is well known

Source text	Target text
Allons, enfants de la <i>Patrie</i> Le jour de <i>gloire</i> est arrivé!	Allons, enfants de la <i>Courtille</i> Le jour de <i>boire</i> est arrivé!

In the parody to “La Marseillaise” of 1879, the author mocks the students finding another proxy for the word “Patrie”: “Allons, enfants des brasseries”.

Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher and theorist of culture, reflects over the problem of translatability of the source text in his article “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (“The Task of the Translator”), which gave rise to a new approach to the issues of translation. In his view, the translator “is to expand and deepen his own language via a foreign language” [2].

Ernst Jandl’s poetry and phonetic translations by Louis Zukofsky were masterminded by the concept of the original text not being superior to translation, which enables the translator to freely experiment with the source text. In France it was also inspired Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Noël Arnaud, Jacques Bens and other representatives of OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) – The Workshop of Potential Literature - founded in 1960 by mathematician François Le Lionnais and writer Raymond Queneau. Homophonic translation understood as preservation of the original phonetic structure was one the multiple limiting strategies exercised by the OULIPO advocates. The Workshop aimed to perform a scientific investigation of language potential via exploring the existing artificial literary restrictions and creating new ones. Well known is the example of F. Le Lionnais’ homophonic version of John Keats’ verse “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever“, which sounds in French as follows: “Un singe débotté est une joie pour l’hiver” [3].

The same line is followed by the members of Outranspo (an acronym composed on the basis of the pattern proposed by OULIPO – OU-X-PO incorporating the words from the three languages of the association – “Ouvroir de Translation Potencial” – The Workshop of Potential Translation. One of the formats of creative projects implemented by the group is collective translation of verses. Thus, having chosen for the poetic experiment a text in the language none of them know the project team came up with the homophonic translation into English, French, Spanish, Italian and Hebrew of a children’s poem in Farsi “Yek zan-e Kordi bestoun” describing preparation for the wedding ceremony [4].

English	Spanish	French	Italian	Hebrew
You sang a chord, the best one!	Y que examen gordo ves tu	Y a que zen et corps tibétain	Io sono un cuore di pesto	כּוֹן יְהִיָּה בּא הַכוֹרֵדִי הַצּאֵן הַ [the Curd that comes with the herd will be as a species]

The texts in the table above closely reproduce the tone of the original text, the contents of which are

consciously ignored. The most complete version of interpretation was performed in French, as this language is characterized by higher homophonic and homonymic potential compared to the others. This feature of the French language was the reason for U. Eco's refusal to translate R. Queneau's "Exercices de style" ("Exercises in Style") into Italian, the homophonic resources of which, according to Eco, are not as abundant as those of the French language [5].

Outranspo members also created a phonetic translation into English of a song performed by the French singer Yves Duteil "La langue de chez nous" [6], the first lines of which are presented below:

Source text	Target text
C'est une langue belle avec des mots superbes Qui porte son histoire à travers ses accents. Où l'on sent la musique et le parfum des herbes Le fromage de chèvre et le pain de froment.	Satan long bell have ache, demon's sperm! Keep her stony story "Hate her" says ex-aunt. Who longs a lame muse sick Help orphans they usurp! Low from age disheveled eloped from mom.

5 Soramimi in German culture

In German culture soramimi is largely viewed as unintentional mishearings, in particular, articles published in "Spiegel" on 12.02.2009 [7] and "Berliner Zeitung" on 30.01.2015 [8] present well-known misheard versions of popular songs with the original lyrics given both in English and in German; these phenomena are described by the Japanese term soramimi. The interest towards this issue was triggered by a series of books by a famous German writer and journalist Axel Hacke. The first book within the series was titled "Der weiße Neger Wumbaba: Kleines Handbuch des Verhörens" ("The White Negro Wumbaba: Collection of Mishearings"). This name is based on the classical mishearing "Der weiße Nebel wunderbar" ("The wonderful white fog") from "Abendlied" ("The Evening Song") by Matthias Claudius, poet and journalist of the XVIII-the century. Among such classical mishearings there are "Agathe Bauer" – originally "I've got the Power" by "Snap!"; "Schnitzelwagen" – originally "den Schritt zu wagen" from the song "Santa Maria" performed by the German singer Roland Kaiser and many others.

Therefore, the German synonym of the term soramimi used in most publications is Verhörer, although there exists another notion – Verballhornung denoting intentionally wrong translation of foreign songs with the view to create a parodic version. This term goes back to the name of Johann Ballhorn, the Lübeck pressman of the XVI century, who once published the Lübeck Code of Laws compiled with a significant amount of various misprints. From the best of motives, he undertook a second edition having corrected all the mistakes, but through the ironic twist of fate the number

of mistakes happened not to decrease but to increase [9, 10].

In the last few years, the Verballhornung phenomenon has acquired an overwhelming popularity on such internet-platforms as Youtube featuring a large amount of videoclips uploaded by various authors. The videos include a song in a foreign language, as well as subtitles with soramimi version in German and visuals representing an animated cartoon normally created by the author in a floppy fashion of internet-meme, which is the hottest new trend among young spectators. Kathrin Fricke's numerous videos called by the author "misheard lyrics" present an illustrative example of such clips [11]. Such an absurd "translation" features subtitles with the English words either borrowed by the German language or well known to most Germans, as well as pop-culture personages and, not infrequently, obscene vocabulary, which, combined with the visuals and music, enhances the intended comic effect.

According to the closure law, one of the fundamental postulates of gestalt psychology, an attempt to perceive an unknown phenomenon forces the human brain to transform the unknown into something familiar. People are known to readily perceive and accept concepts and ideas, which meet their expectations and which they already have some idea about. Therefore, the unknown sign is unintentionally replaced with the familiar one, which appears to be more convincing and justified in the context. Soramimi differ from mondegreens, as the former are made on purpose, but their formation is underlain by the idea of actualization of a potential meaning, an implicit suggestion that a concrete sign may be heard in this particular way.

As argued by Stephen Connor, mondegreens result from unconscious attempts to conceptualize words via filling the accidental lexical gaps with the words from individual lexicon. "Though mishearings may appear pleasingly or even subversively to sabotage sense, they are in fact in essence negentropic, which is to say, they push up the slope from random noise to the redundancy of voice, moving therefore from the direction of nonsense to sense, of nondirection to direction" [12].

6 Conclusion

Soramimi may not be considered translation per se, if we define the latter as an attempt to reproduce by means of the target language the content originally expressed in the source language. It however may not be denied that soramimi texts result from interpreting activity of the addressee. According to U. Eco, "considering any interpretation activity as a kind of translation is deeply rooted in hermeneutic tradition" [13].

The notion of cognitive dissonance is a theoretical tool, which is instrumental in explaining peculiarities of translators' way of thinking and motivation from the viewpoint of the theory of epistemology. Creation of soramimi is a ludic strategy of overcoming the aporia of translatability/untranslatability and alignment of cognitive dissonance. The transfer of "the notion of untranslatability into a different mental space, that is

from the domain of conceptualizing source language and target language relations as objective one into the domain of individual knowledge and perception of a concrete translator” [14] forms a background for considering homophonic translation as an interpretative strategy of cognitive dissonance alignment.

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