Interdisciplinary approach in teaching Korean literature: 
Deciphering the cultural code underlying the texts

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It is obvious that no study of literature can be done in isolation from other disciplines, especially social sciences. Discussing the literary text in the class involves contextualizing it, telling about its author, the historical period it was written in or about, the philosophical thoughts and socio-political climate of that period, etc. Depending on the dominant themes in the text, the literature teacher delves into aspects of history, philosophy, psychology and science. In Moscow State Linguistic University we teach future translators who should not only read and understand but also translate literary texts correctly from Korean into Russian, and the very important thing our students should be acquainted with is the cultural code underlying the literary texts in Korean. We also must take into consideration the differences between Korean and Russian cultural codes as well as between South Korean and North Korean ones.

First of all we should say that the concept of “cultural code” itself is a matter of discussion. The term “code” as used in semiotics evinces a fundamental ambiguity inherited from the lexical meaning of the word. R. Jacobson was one of the first semioticians to adopt the term “code” from communication theory. In 1953 reflecting on the correlation between culture and language he declared: “The most essential problem for speech analysis is that of the code common to both sender and receiver and underlying the exchange of messages”\textsuperscript{168}. Developing this thought Eco stated that

communication, including the processes of “signification” and “interpretation” \(^\text{169}\), is made possible by the existence of codes.

For working interpreters (translators) and language & literature teachers it would be logical to understand “cultural code” as a multilevel dynamic system letting to see, interpret and translate into other languages the meaning inherent in the message addressed to the carrier of such a code. As the levels available for familiarization to the non-carriers of the code could be identified: 1) the common knowledge about the world, including natural objects and cultural objects, 2) the mentality as a way of perceiving the world and ourselves in it on the basis of some values and what else, 3) the linguistic picture of the world implying the existence of certain “concepts”, 4) the involvement into various discourses 5) collective memory, etc. So it becomes clear that the condition for more or less complete understanding of the text of the foreign cultural code is primarily the widening of the interpreter’s “semantic horizon” (the term by G. Gadamer) up to the extent in which it can “fuse” with the “semantic horizon” of the text. The identification of the above-mentioned levels and the connections between them turned out to be very intricate task itself.

I am going to show how we work with our students at deciphering Korean cultural code when reading and translating prosaic and poetic texts. I would like to focus on two literary translation tasks which I proposed to the students of Moscow State Linguistic University last year.

The first of them, designed for the whole Korean group, was connected with Gwanghwamun Poetry Placard. Gwanghwamun Poetry Placard on the Kyobo Life Building in Seoul, Republic of Korea, leading its history since 1991, was originally designed to enhance the company’s image, but soon acquired a social significance on a national scale. For over 20 years, in the beginning of each season new poetic lines, selected by a special committee as the most consistent with the spirit of time

and meeting the socio-psychological needs of the South Korean people, appear at this Placard. The ideas concentrated in these highly metaphorical lines from various poems well-known in RK are not always clear for representatives of other cultures.

The students were asked to choose one stanza to their own taste and then 1) find out from what poem it was taken, 2) translate the poem analyzing its image system, 3) determine what message the stanza from the Placard carries to the people. The first task was quite easy, the second was more difficult, and the third turned out to be almost impossible to do without consultation with Koreans or teacher’s help, because of the differences in the cultural codes of Russians and South Koreans almost at all levels.

As a result of the analysis of the chosen texts, we identified the following “isotopic lines” of the project:

1) non-accidental obtaining of the good as the result of daily efforts and overcoming difficulties,

2) collectivism,

3) closeness to the nature,

4) love as attention, care about each other,

5) non-conspicuous uniqueness of each person and each day lived by him/her.

Thus while reading poetry we deepened our knowledge about South Korean society.

As we can see, one of the isotopic lines (the term by A. Greimas) that can be traced through the stanzas from Gwanghwamun Placard is collectivism. In winter of 1998, for example, the following lines by Ko Un were printed on the Placard with almost no design:

모어서 숲이 된다. [Together, we are becoming a forest.]
나무 하나하나 죽이지 않고 숲이 된다. [We don’t kill a single tree and are becoming a forest.]

그 숲의 시절로 우리는 간다 [We are coming back to the era of forest.]

In summer of 2015 the lines from the poem by 정희성 [Chong Hui-seong] “숲” [“Forest”]

“제가봄서 있어도 나무 들은 숲이었어 그대 와 나는 왜 숲이 아닌가 [The trees standing separately are still the forest, why are not you and I?]” were printed on the Placard against the background of the green forest.

In the both stanzas the same image of “숲” [“forest”] is used.

Forest for the Europeans is an element of nature opposed to the city (in Korea it is rather a “산” [“mountain / forest”]). Nevertheless it is not so difficult to explain the essence of this image to the Europeans. Since childhood, we see in books variations of the story of the father who teaches his sons about unity offering first to break the bundle of sticks and then easily breaking the sticks one by one. The difficulty is in translating the word “숲” into Russian. Since it is a fixed image in the Korean literature, it should be translated identically in all cases so as to become recognizable. But in Russian the word “лес” [“forest”], as well as other nouns, has a grammatical gender (male), and in the translations of poems written by women looks a little bit strange. For example, in the poem by Moon Chung-hee “정월 일기” [“January Diary”] we read:

지금 내가 할 수 있는 최대의 애정은

...

...

식어버린 가슴들 부끄러이 깨워
И большее, на что способна я сейчас [The ultimate thing I can do now is],
...
...

Стать рощей, где витае легкий ветер [To become a grove…],
Тревожа охладевшие сердца.

The grammatical number of this noun is also a problem: “лес” [“forest”] in the singular form is often used in Russian as a kind of mass noun with the same meaning as its plural form “леса” [“forests”]. In the story by Yi Mun-yol “두겹의 노래” [“Twofold Song”] we see the passage about dissociation of people: “숲과 숲 사이가 또는 나무와 나무 사이가 점점 멀어져 갔어요” [“... the distance between the trees and forests (or groves?) grew wider apart”]. Thus the word “роща” [“grove”] as an equivalent for Korean “숲” in some cases is more suitable in respect of grammar and meaning, but we should take into account that in the Russian poetry it has implicit romantic connotations, absolutely unnecessary for the translations of the above-mentioned Korean texts.

The following Placard also gives food for thought. Here we find the alteration of lines and replacing of the explicit appeal to the collective memory about the Korean War with the implicit one:
[Let everybody, who has gone, come back. / Let’s welcome the snow. / Under the snow let’s love!]


On the web-page of Kyobo Insurance Company dedicated to Gwanghwamun Poetry Placard these lines are commented as follows: “마음 떠난 사람들을, 역경에 빠진 사람들 모두 돌아와 새해에는 분열을 멈추고 한마음으로 화합하자는 메시지를 담고 있음. 또한 사람들이 역경을 극복할 수 있도록 북돋아주고 격려해주어 용기를 얻을 수 있도록 한다는 의미임. 신장생인 학과 새롭고 따뜻함을 상징하는 눈을 통하여 신년의 맥과 상서로움을 표현하며 한방향으로 무리지어 날아가는 학의 모습 화합하고 새시대를 개척해 나가자는 의미의 표현임 [They carry a call to the return of those who has gone or are in difficult circumstances, to putting an end to the controversy in the new year and to unification. The idea is that people should find the strength to overcome the circumstances. The crane is one of ten traditional Korean symbols of longevity, and cranes along with the snow symbolizing renewal and warmth appear here as good omens for the new year; a flock of cranes flying together seems to offer people to unite and start a new era].”

relations between South and North are mentioned nowhere, but the lines on the Placard are a modified quotation from the poem by Ko Un “강설” [“Snowfall”].

강설 [Snowfall]

고은 [Ko Un]

폐허(廃墟)에 눈 내린다. [Snow is falling on the ruins.]

적(敵)도 동지(同志)도 [ Enemies and friends,]

함께 모이자. [Let’s get together!]

함께 눈을 맞자. [Let’s welcome the snow!]

눈 맞으며 꺼안고 울자. [Under the snow let’s hug and cry!]

폐허(廃墟)에 눈 내린다. [Snow is falling on the ruins.]

우리가 1950 년대(年代)에 깨달은 것은 [In 1950s we comprehended]

인산인해(人山人海)의 죽음이 아니라 사랑이다. [Not the death of a myriad but love.]

눈이 내린다. [Snow is falling.]

눈이 내린다. [Snow is falling.]

모든 죽은 사람들까지도 살아나서 [All the deads revive!]

함께 눈을 맞자. [Let’s welcome the snow!]

눈 맞으며 울자. [Under the snow let’s cry!]
우리는 분명 죄의 족속이다. [We are a gangsters clan.]

눈을 맞자. [Let’s welcome the snow!]

눈 맞으며 사랑하자. [Under the snow let’s love!]

Obviously, the poet talks about the people who have gone not just somewhere but to another world. Moreover he uses the verb “죽다” [“die”] instead of the euphemistic phrase “세상을 떠나다” [“leave this world”]. In 2004 South Korea was governed by the President Roh Moo-hyun conducted with regard to North Korea the Policy of Peace and Prosperity, which in general was a continuation of Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy. Negotiations about the meetings of separated families moved very actively. However in the book “History of Korea: from Antiquity to the Beginning of the XXI Century” S.O. Kurbanov writes: “in <...> the programs of two South Korean presidents Kim Dae-jung and Rho Moo-hyun North Korea was presented as a passive object, which should be provided with full support and be lead in the direction of South Korea’s policy on inter-Korean relations” 171. But Ko Un in his poem using propositive final endings suggests a meeting of equals, “enemies and friends... we are a gangsters clan” – he says. And the collective memory of the South Koreans about the War as a disaster, everybody suffered from and everybody is to blame for, allows them to see in the poetic lines deep philosophical and political meaning. The design of the Placard is very important, the crane being a symbol of longevity makes readers think about life and death, not just about the separation.

Unfortunately, as we know, the hopes of many people of the South for rapprochement with the North did not come true for some reasons.

In continuation of the topic I would like to tell about the second translation task, which was given to one student to be fulfilled in the frame of the graduate work. It was analysis and translation of the stories by Korean writers about the Korean War. It may be noted that in this thematic field the “semantic horizons” of the Russians and Koreans do not differ so much as to obstruct proper perception of the texts, except for the level of “collective memory” (the Russians just do not have such about the Korean War) and to some extent the level of “mentality”. The collective memory and mentality largely determine the themes, the tone and “ideological degree” of the narratives and thus the message they carry.

In North Korean texts the war is presented as something well-organized, as a chain of planned and thought-out military operations against the enemy clearly identified, whereas South Koreans are not very enthusiastic about blaming the adversary or praising their army, they present the war as a chaos, pay more attention to the evil nature of war as well as to physical and moral traumas caused by it.

In North Korean literature the enemy is clearly identified. And the main enemy is the American imperialists. Not only the word “enemy” («적»), but also such word combinations as “the imperialist (US) gangsters” («미제날강도들»), “imperialist invading army” («미제침략군»), “imperialist jackals” («미제숭남아들»), “imperialist mercenaries” («미제고용병들») are widely used in the texts. In the newspapers of the Soviet era we could see the Russian-language originals of these word combinations. Modern students are not well acquainted with and should intentionally look for them to make an adequate translation.

Here we often meet with abnormal grotesque, not typical in any way for the literature of the Soviet Union. In the “hot battles” North Korean soldiers “heroically” “pierce the enemies with
bayonets” and leave their disgusting corpses “to rot in the field”. The transmitting of this grotesque is another not simple task for the translator.

In the works written by South Korean authors in the early post-war years we find the confusion came from the fact that former friends suddenly became enemies, and in unnecessary war with these friends-enemies people have to risk the most valuable thing they possess – life.

In the later works what dominates is the very humane, but a little bit schizophrenic idea that everybody is guilty and no one in particular. The word “enemy” is almost never used, and the translators also should give preference to its various euphemisms like “противник” [“adversary”], “противоположная сторона” [“the opposite side”]. The armies are called as they are: “Korean People’s Army” (조선 인민군) and “The National Army of the Republic of Korea” / “Republic of Korea Army” (대한민국 국군). Sometimes it even obstructs reading of the translated texts, requiring a modicum of historical knowledge, especially considering that in the European languages the words «조선» and «대한민국» are translated both as “Korea”.

We work at various translation tasks with our students during every school year, but these two, I told about, show very clearly that, when making literary translation, we must use the interdisciplinary approach and take into account many things to convey not only the letter but also the spirit of the texts.
References


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