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AMERICAN STUDIES IN TEACHING
TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING

In the present paper I will put forward some ideas concerning the relevance of cultural studies in general, and American studies in particular, to the teaching of advanced translation and interpreting.

These ideas have been initiated and in fact, necessitated, by an actual teaching program started at Szeged University in 1978. It is a comprehensive, 4-year program leading to a degree and offering thorough training in an English-Hungarian context. As the knowledge of English of the students when beginning the training is of intermediate level, the first two semesters primarily involve language learning and teaching; that is, the teaching of mostly British English, and an introductory course to American English; and there are also some advanced courses concerning various aspects of Hungarian, the mother tongue. The cultural component is incorporated mainly from the second year onward, i.e. during the part of the training actually devoted to translation and interpreting, although, naturally, a certain amount of elementary cultural material is taught from the very beginning. The training is given in general translation and interpreting, in other words, there is no specialization apart from the fact that the basic orientation is toward social sciences and the

humanities rather than science and technology, or any type of highly technical text. The total number of hours available for teaching culture will be equally divided between British and American, and though all my examples are from the field of American studies, a good deal of what is proposed should *mutatis mutandis* apply to British studies and should, in fact, be relevant to any culture studies for the purpose of teaching general translation and interpreting, and, to some extent, to various language teaching situations. A discussion of teaching methods of syllabus details is, therefore, not an aim of this paper; I will rather deal with some of the assumptions underlying the role of American studies in the given context and with some basic considerations concerning the contents of a university course.

In Hungarian as well as in many other Central European universities, there have been in the past basically two differing, and occasionally conflicting concepts of foreign (in this case, non-Hungarian) culture studies. One is literature-oriented and assumes or takes it for granted without questioning that literature is the primary and by far the most important representative of the achievements of a nation, sometimes together with music, philosophy, and creative arts. This, of course, is a general view shared by Europeans and Americans alike, although many sociologists claim to have found that the role and significance Europeans--especially Middle Europeans--attach to literature is markedly different from corresponding American views and attitudes. For one thing, it is true that in many European universities litera-

ture is massively taught not only to those who want a degree or specialize in literature, but also to many students of all kinds of other branches of knowledge, or so it seems at least from an American point of view. A case in point could be represented by various teacher training universities where for instance English language teacher trainees mandatorily participate in 8-semester programs of English and American literature with heavy reading lists covering thousands of pages each semester, a good portion of which is written in archaic English. There is the argument, on the other hand, that those who are against these programs are missing the idea entirely, as the students in question, for instance, are supposed to become not just "teachers of English", but "teachers of English language and literature", which is their official title. And it is not just the title that makes the difference. Literature is actually part of the language-teaching profession as well as many other professions, and further, it is present in the everyday life of people from all walks of life. For a very direct and simple indication of this in the language, think of any of the numerous Hungarian phrases having in them the element *irodalom* (literature), as *irodalmi est*, *irodalombardt*, *élet és irodalom*, *irodalom-politika*, *irodalmi kávéház*, and so on, all pointing to an inter-relatedness of literature and life. I think this at least partly explains the fact that whenever we want to study the culture of another country, literature automatically comes into focus, and this is also one of the reasons for the very existence of the numerous literature-centered American courses

in this country.

The assumptions underlying the other kind of culture courses go back to the German *Landeskunde*, and Russian *stranovedenie* concept. These courses claim to give the student of a foreign language a so-called "background" or "general orientation" of the country or countries where the language in question is spoken. They are assumed to help the students in their language studies, but have in the past amounted to not much more than casual and somewhat haphazard adjuncts to language courses. Almost invariably, they have a lower prestige than the literature courses I discussed above, which may partly be due to their haphazard nature, but, undoubtedly, this lower prestige is also an indication of the priority of literature in Hungarian universities.

An introductory course to American culture can, and should be used, as much as possible, to prepare the student for going to America if he has the opportunity to supplement his studies there; it should help him avoid or at least quickly overcome the so-called America-shock, something said to sooner or later affect most of our students precisely because of the cultural differences between the two parts of the world, which are far-reaching and are in their essence hidden from the student who has not studied them carefully. But because going to America is a very ambitious aim for a Hungarian student, in fact, too ambitious in most cases, such a course must even function as a substitute--although never adequate, we must realize--for staying in that country.

However, in the training of translators and interpreters,

whose job will be to deal with languages and very often with subtle differences between two given languages, the chief aim of culture courses must be linguistic. Strictly linguistic, it must be emphasized, because this makes it somewhat different from what is referred to as "background knowledge", useful, the language books tell us, or even necessary perhaps, for mastering a second or a foreign language, I think that we should consider the cultural component as one of the features of language itself as seen from the point of view of the learner. In other words, we should consider culture in the language teaching context as an integral part of language with a structuring of its own somewhat like that of grammar or phonology. The structures or patterns are possible--although not at all easy--to observe, examine, describe, and process for teaching purposes, and this should be done by way of a constant comparison with the elements of the so-called source culture (in our particular case: Hungarian), or, to put it precisely, the method in research as well as in teaching should be contrastive and confrontative. In the learning situation, items of the source culture (that is, the native culture in the vast majority of cases) can interfere with those of the target culture, with the cultural interference resulting in what we might call a cultural accent. This accent, one simple and easily detectable form of which is inappropriate word usage, is such that it can obstruct or hinder communication just as badly, or even more seriously than, let us say, a phonetic or phonological accent.

Of the various aspects of the learner's language, it

is most of all *meaning* that is affected by a knowledge of, or by a lack of knowledge of, culture, therefore we have to be concerned with its conveyor, the lexicon of the language, that is, with those lexical items that are *significantly culture-bound*. Culture-bound words and other units can be classified and sub-classified based on a careful and thorough study of their complex meanings, including referential meanings and "connotations".

A relatively simple class, for example, will be that of certain proper names, to a sub-class of which we can assign certain geographical names. The semantic fields covered by lexical units like *The Alamo*, *Podunk*, *Wounded Knee* or *Gettysburgh*, for example, are so complex that they reach far beyond their so-called dictionary meanings; still, they must be treated as parts of the regular word-stock of American English, the learning of which, however, requires much more than the acquisition of the forms and the dictionary meanings. The semantic fields in question are possible to identify and describe, I believe, although this presupposes a complex knowledge of various aspects of American culture.

Now let us look at a few examples of how cultural differences appear as language problems in actual translation. Attila József wrote a major poem shortly before his death in 1937, which in the American translation that was published soon afterward had the title "At the Rim of the City", a perfect-looking, although word-for-word translation from the original. The only snag is that Hungarian *perem*, for which the translator chose *rim* is, and was especially in the 30s,

associated with the most run-down and poor districts of a city, something that *rim* does not convey at all. In fact, *suburbia*, with which it might be logically associated, has just about the opposite connotation. And an appropriate translation of American *suburbia* into Hungarian, by the way, presupposes the same kind of cultural insight that the translator of the poem lacked.

Still more hazardous are those translation situations where on the surface it appears that we have word-for-word translation equivalents to begin with, as sometimes it only becomes clear after examining the cultural elements that the equivalence is formal or does not go beyond a kind of dictionary equivalence. One could mention as examples expressions like *school bus*, *party convention*, *social work*, or *co-operative*, and many more, which are, because of easily identifiable and neat-looking formal correspondences in Hungarian, likely to mislead the translator or the interpreter, unless he has the necessary training in American culture.

The following example signifies a slightly more complex translation problem. Consider the following sentence taken from an American magazine: "The girls' party had been rather dull, however, I made Betsy write a bread-and-butter card, first thing in the morning." At first sight, this sentence should be very easy to translate into Hungarian or probably into any other European language, though of course, the expression "bread-and-butter letter" would have to be replaced by something like a "thank-you letter", given the fact that

Hungarian, like several other European languages I know of, simply does not have the phrase. So far so good. The trouble is that the translation in a way will mean almost the opposite of what the original does, since it is not only the phrase that is not known in Hungary, but also the custom of sending bread-and-butter letters, cards, or making calls etc. Therefore, while the mother in the English sentence behaves quite normally, at least in the given middle-class setting, the mother in the translation, no matter what the setting, does something very strange and unusual, or is even suggested as behaving in a very hypocritical way. I do not know, especially without a larger context, what an adequate translation might be, but I think it is obvious that an awareness of the cultural difference that causes the problem is the first step toward a solution.

The other aim of the course, i.e. the preparation of the student for America, as it were, is not and should not be entirely separated from the linguistic one. In fact, the teaching material (including coursebooks, movies, slides, recordings etc.) must be designed in such a way that the two things run parallel to the extent that it is possible. Here is a simple example: in one of the coursebooks at Szeged University, there is going to be a chapter supplemented by a series of slides showing some of the history and especially the present status of the telephone in America and how it has affected the life of Americans. There is a description of how business is done by telephone in America. It is then that expressions and clichés like *collect call*, *yellow pages*,

or "Please don't call us, we'll call you" etc., are introduced, as by that time the student should be ready to grasp their real meaning and significance. And it is after all that, of course, that consideration of, and attempts at, translation possibilities and variants follow, but that does not concern us here.

As for the teaching material, this is no place to discuss any syllabus details, but I would like to refer briefly to some assumptions and considerations which, if proven valid by teaching results, could be drawn upon by researchers and course designers not just in the given Hungarian setting, but also in any similar teaching situation.

If the contents of the course are to be in accord with the aims, we have a rather dramatic departure from both literature-centered teaching--and in fact from any concept that allows only high intellectual achievements or "culture with a big C"--and from the traditional "Landskunde" or "Kulturkunde"-type courses. Although most elements of these latter-type courses will be included or at least touched upon in coursebooks or in lectures at Szeged, they will mostly just serve as the ABC to what we sometimes call the anthropological aspect of the program, and even so emphasis will be shifted from things to people at the very start.

It seems that while the two traditional approaches concentrate on the best intellectual achievements on the one hand and institutions and the natural environment on the other (Landskunde roughly meaning, the knowledge of the land) they pay little attention to our primary concern, the people. We

are interested in what is typical and characteristic in the common man, we might say in the "average American", in his way of thinking, patterns of life style, in what he does or how he reacts in different situations--including both "home ground" and when abroad: think of the stereotype of the "ugly American"--his traditions, his religious and other beliefs, his attitudes, values, and ideals; in a word, in all the things that are sometimes collectively referred to as "culture with a small c".

Values and ideals , for example, together with the need to compare them to those of the source culture are often mentioned in various manuals on translation and interpreting, but the real significance of the task is seldom weighed, perhaps because we find it difficult to believe that other people can be so radically different, given the universal nature of human character. Of course, the existence of strong cultural universals cannot and should not be denied--in fact, they are, among other things, what make translation possible in the first place. Yet, we must reckon with differences that can surprise not only the unassuming layman but even the researcher, especially when cultures of the same "culture family" are being compared, i.e. cultures supposedly very similar to each other; as we can see in the following example. The quotation is taken from a European government publication, a sort of propaganda booklet dealing with topics people are said to be commonly discussing in the given country as well as perhaps in several other countries.

"That young man had before him a crude, yet simple,

clear and attainable aim. There was no reason to interfere with his advance towards it. Let him furnish his flat well, let him establish his orchard (*even if for the sake of the income* and not for a love of nature), let him buy a car. Having achieved this *crude and primitive aim*, (*italics mine*) he would (if he was developing normally) set himself a more distant, higher, more refined aim. I am not arguing, of course, that this young man is by any means a leading member of today's society...". Now it is obvious that the basic value system underlying these statements is very different from, and at several points even runs counter to, let us say, an American value system, according to which the young man in the quotation would probably be "highly" valued, and would actually be considered a "leading member" of society ("leading" here really meaning "respected").

In the past, various attempts have been made to teach "culture with a small c", but it seems that actual teaching work has not very often gone beyond an unstructured presentation of various clichés and stereotypes usually serving to reinforce the student's image of the target culture, which is by nature almost invariably simplistic, and hence, false.

We have asked a few students who spent some time in the United States about how much of their previous knowledge of the people and the country had turned out to be helpful in any way, and the usual answer is that even though their information was not necessarily incorrect, it was mostly irrelevant. They had to start from scratch, so to speak.

One ultimate reason for inefficient teaching, I think,

is a failure to realize the complexity and the many ramifications of the task, and a failure to see that efficient teaching material can only be designed on the basis of massive and far-reaching cultural, anthropological and interdisciplinary research. Another problem is the failure so far to appreciate the significance of the contrastive approach, although it has the advantage, among other things, that it can reveal many facets of the *source culture* that would otherwise remain hidden from the observer.

As for the actual contents of the course, let me try to refer to its general character with a few examples. Literature, to begin with, is included. But rather than doing exclusively what we would be advised to do by literature course-books or literary criticism or *The New York Book Review*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, etc., we do refer to, let us say, *Love Story* and Earl Stanly Gardener's books and various other popular paperbacks; not necessarily and often not at all--for their literary value, but because we know that they influence the thinking and ultimately perhaps the lives of large groups of people in America, and therefore a knowledge of them is necessary for the understanding of the people. We incorporate systematic reviewing of various non-fictional or non-literary publications from the comic books to the more influential magazines, as these all play a rôle in forming the American mind. All this must be done without making any immediate value judgements concerning either the publications in question or the tastes of the people reading them.

Most major topics in the conventional Landeskunde

courses are incorporated. But, to take geography, for instance, we are not concerned with, let us say, exactly how high Mt. Marcy in Upstate New York is (that sort of factual information can be obtained very easily from a handbook or guidebook anyway), but again with what significance, if any, that particular place has for Americans, or for any group of Americans, tourists or otherwise. In the field of history, emphasis will be shifted in the direction of aspects such as popular viewings of the past; and the attitudes of the "average" American toward history in contrast with Middle European images wherever possible.

Naturally, areas where there are considerable differences between the two peoples get much more attention than others, and, more importantly, we try to make an attempt at finding the areas and aspects of life in America that have practically no counterparts in Hungary. Some of these are relatively easy to identify (think of the almost diametrically opposed political and economic systems and their numerous direct implications), while others are more subtle and difficult to observe, not to mention describe and present in a coherent and systematic way.

As most of our students are being trained to become not only translators but also interpreters, we try to cover areas that have to do with face-to-face communication and may cause misunderstanding. One such area is *gesture and body language*, something that has been studied in the United States and to some extent also in Hungary, although a contrastive study has not yet been done. The American's concept and use

of *time* is a background element to communication in general, and this we have to study and contrast with Hungarian attitudes. Concerning time, some contrastive research has been done in a North American-Latin American, especially Mexican, context. Taking this as a starting point, a preliminary observation on the time concept of Hungarians seems to indicate that it can roughly be placed somewhere between "*hora americana*" at one extreme, and "*hora mexicana*" at the other. For yet another field, we try to study the American concept and handling of *space*, which upon detailed examination reveals important differences from that of Hungarians, and therefore needs to be studied in a large variety of situations.

Such and similar studies, we hope, will eventually lead to a comprehensive survey for teaching purposes of what may be called *national character*, though the validity of the expression itself is being debated by several scholars.

Finally, we are trying to make use of recent research concerning the American self-image, that is we are interested in how Americans see America as a country and themselves as a people, as we consider this an important aspect of their character, although we feel that here one must be especially careful in how far one can go generalizing. Furthermore, we are interested in the American's image of other nations, notably of Hungarians. Some examples of such an image of other nations are directly reflected in language. In the 19th century, around the time that large numbers of poor Hungarian peasants were emigrating to the United States, an expression, although not entirely complementary, was formed which can now be heard

in various parts of the Mid-West and which goes "You look like you've just gotten out of the boat from Hungary". Conversely, Hungarian has various expressions with the element "American" in them.

Images of other nations have at least two things in common. One is that they are of necessity incomplete and inaccurate, although the degree of incorrectness can vary; and the other is that the people concerned are usually unaware of them. The so-called average Hungarian, if he goes to America or simply talks with Americans is likely to be very much surprised to learn that most everybody knows about certain things and people he has never heard of in his life, and may on the other hand indignantly find that Americans have no idea of people, things, and achievements he cherishes most, and vice versa, of course.

Ultimately, besides the aforementioned linguistic aim, a main purpose of our American course is to correct false images, disperse false and unjustified value judgements, and to promote a better understanding of Americans as a people.

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