“Whiter than White”? Mistranslation in the
International Media Process

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Intercultural news reporting is a complex process that cannot be dissociated from the concepts of “newsworthiness” and “news values”. (Fowler, 1991) Important concepts to consider in relation to news values include: the social construction of news, consensus, personalization, gate-keeping, ethnocentrism and the negative orientation of newsworthiness. This paper will consider one apparently minor translation incident to illustrate reporting within Britain of the European Community in relation to these concepts.

On the BBC 9.00 o’clock news of 16th March, 1999, a statement made by the then President of the European Commission, Jacques Santer, in French, was dubbed in English. This was far more than a routine statement as Santer was announcing the collective resignation of the whole European Commission after a report criticizing it for incompetence, cronyism and fraud. As there is on-going, often emotive and critical public debate about Britain’s entry into the common European currency, and indeed about the whole relationship between Britain and Europe, the media reporting of this statement in Britain could be seen to be significant in terms of its influence on public opinion.

A news “story” that is published or broadcast on any particular day is not a one-off, independent product. It is part of a process of serialization over a period of time, linked to other stories that precede and follow it on the same or on a related topic. Fowler (1991: 12) points out that “negative events ... receive massive newspaper and television coverage”. This particular story is highly “newsworthy” in Britain because of its negative content relating to allegations of large-scale mis-use of European community resources. It is heavily personalized as Jacques Santer is represented as the villain of the piece as the President of the Commission but also as a negative persona within the whole complex relationship between Britain and Europe. Bell (1991: 158) points out that political news reports, rather like fictional narratives, tend to forefront a few “elite” personalities rather than provide a more complete overview of an issue. They are newsworthy only if the story establishes the “eliteness” of the actors. At the same time, from the point of view of national ideology, Santer is presented as the key member of what Fowler (1991: 16) refers to as a “defining group felt to be unlike oneself, alien, threatening”. In Fowler’s terms, he is one of “them”, opposed to the ethnocentric consensual notion of “us” which includes only those perceived to be like ourselves. In this way, in spite of Britain’s official membership within the European Community, the news report situates its ideology in opposition to any political concept of a European consensus that includes Britain.
Bell (1991: 66) underlines the importance of the fact that all news, but foreign news in particular, is subject to massive language editing and “translation is a major language function of the international agencies”. Whereas exact figures cannot be posited with any confidence given the sheer volume of international news that circulates every day, it is estimated that as little as ten percent of an original copy of a foreign news report is likely to find its way into the final published draft. Only a short extract of Santer’s lengthy statement was selected as newsworthy for the prime time news broadcast. As Reah (1998: 4/5) points out, the reader or listener normally has only minimal control over what is presented, little or no knowledge over what is left out and may not have other independent sources of information against which the information content may be checked.

The selected extract referred to the personal accusation of favouritism made against Santer himself rather than to criticisms of his overall role as Commission President. The longer BBC web page report, (16.03.99) “Why they had to go” summarizes what it calls “a damning report by independent investigators” on the commission. The BBC web page report acknowledged that Santer himself was cleared by the investigation of any allegations of favouritism, but the personalized selection process for the broadcast news not only fails to mention this, it also tends to imply the opposite.

In the broadcast extract in question, Santer was cited as saying that he was “whiter than white”. What he actually said in French was: “Je constate avec beaucoup de satisfaction que je suis entièrement blanchi ...” The problem here is the meaning in context of the term, “blanchi”. “Blanchi” has a common propositional meaning related to cleaning washing, as illustrated in the phrase, “blanchir le linge”. However, it is the figurative meaning that is at issue here: “blanchir quelqu’un” meaning “to declare someone innocent”. There are nonetheless overtones of the propositional meaning of “whitened” in the term “blanchi”, even in its figurative use. However, by translating Santer as saying that he was “whiter than white”, he is represented as claiming to be “irreproachable” in the whole affair. The web page also adopts the same translation.

But Mr Santer said, “I’m whiter than white.” He protested, “I have no guilt whatsoever.”

While the term “whiter than white” can be paraphrased as “irreproachable” in English, the term “entièremenent blanchi” can only mean “cleared of any suspicion of personal guilt” in this context. It does not imply that Santer is claiming to be beyond reproach in his role as President of the European Commission. We might note that a literal back translation of “whiter than white” is possible in French with a similar connotation (“plus blanc que blanc”). To summarize, the linguistic evidence strongly suggests that Santer was only referring with understandable relief to those charges directed against him personally in relation to which he had been cleared of personal wrong-doing. He was not claiming to be irreproachable in a general sense and openly admitted that mistakes had been made by his commission, although he strongly disagreed with the investigation’s overall findings.
The phrase, “whiter than white”, however, soon became a catchword, repeatedly quoted to criticize Santer in subsequent prime time news broadcasts. On the BBC web page the phrase appears under his picture as well as in the quotation of his statement. The phrase was even quoted back to him in an exclusive interview with the BBC, this time conducted in English on the following day, indicating that the BBC itself had either not noticed or had not acknowledged its mistranslation.

Santer himself pointed out that he had never said he was “whiter than white” claiming that he had been mistranslated. The BBC’s reaction to Santer’s own claim of mistranslation after the interview is ambivalent. The BBC web page of March 17th states:

He also denied saying he was “whiter than white”. Mr Santer said the confusion came about because of a mistranslation from the French.

In this quotation, the BBC does not acknowledge that there was a mistranslation. This might easily lead to the conclusion for the non-French speaking Englishman that Santer is trying to retract what he really did say. After all, in spite of his very sound ability to communicate in English, Santer has a very marked accent that might give an impression of less competence than he actually possesses.

The presumably unintentional mistranslation does seem to reflect Santer’s attempt to defend his leadership of the commission in other parts of his statement. However, by selectively insisting on one mistranslated phrase, the BBC misrepresented Santer. The BBC, whether intentionally or unintentionally, repeatedly associated Santer with the “whiter than white” phrase, drawing attention away from the real content of his statement. The use of the phrase can be seen to play a gate-keeping role, in the sense that it filters and distorts the informational content, favouring an ideological, emotive and potentially nationalistic response.

The BBC World Service runs an interactive web page that allows readers to give their opinions on current issues. On the “Talking Point” web page (17.03.99) the topic is “Should Santer go? Your Reaction”. One UK reader makes the following comment:

Clearly he should go. Whether he is whiter than white or not, he demonstrates a lack of judgement with his approach to the incident.

This comment illustrates how the BBC’s own mistranslated phrase, readily packaged by the BBC for instant use, is picked up and re-used in the same way by a reader/listener expressing a negative opinion. In this way the BBC inevitably hardened the already Euro sceptic consensus of the public at a time when important choices had to be made about the relationship between Britain and Europe. One would not want to claim that the impact of just one phrase could be decisive. Nevertheless, phrases such as “whiter than white” taken from the world of adverti-
ing are designed to have an immediate conative impact on the listener. It is a well-known, memorable and resonant phrase, involving a double tonic accent on only one sound. It also has strong cultural overtones - “whiter than white” makes an ironic inter-textual reference to well-known British TV washing powder commercials. The BBC interpreter is hence establishing cultural distance between himself and the speaker whose meaning he is supposed to interpret. He is not identifying himself with the speaker, as a speaker might reasonably expect a translator to do, but rather identifying himself as a critical British listener. It is normal interpreting practice for a specialized interpreter to translate into his or her own language. However, in cases of potential ideological disagreement between the source and target language culture, this practice is problematic.

Anyone who has been called on to practise simultaneous interpretation is aware of the split-second decisions that have to be made instinctively. This episode illustrates a common problem of the intercultural media process, rather than a professional weakness of one interpreter. The instant nature of media communication, influenced by the speed of Internet communication is the source of the problem. Internet can also provide the solution, as it is now possible to access a wider variety of sources on all sides of an issue. It might, however, be unrealistic to assume that we are capable of systematically mistrusting first impressions, or of reserving judgement until various sources have been examined.

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