

## TRANSLATING CULTURE: EXPLORING *KOS/HYGGE*, THE CONCEPT OF ENJOYING A SIMPLE LIFE, DEEPLY ROOTED IN THE NORWEGIAN AND DANISH CULTURES

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**ABSTRACT.** *Translating Culture: Exploring kos/hygge, the Concept of Enjoying a Simple Life, Deeply Rooted in the Norwegian and Danish Cultures.* This paper intended to justify the role assumed by culture in the context of translating a concept that is considered to be defining for the Scandinavian culture. Because language use is highly contextual, the translation process becomes a complex endeavour to understand how cultural identity, values and attitudes are expressed through language. In order to provide evidence that supports the interconnections between language and culture, this paper has offered an insight into the linguistic situation in Norway.

**Keywords:** *translating culture, language, Norwegian, Danish, hygge, cultural representations.*

**REZUMAT.** *Interpretarea culturală: Analiza conceptului kos/hygge, despre bucuria unei vieți simple, concept adânc înrădăcinat în culturile norvegiană și daneză.* Acest studiu a intenționat să justifice rolul asumat de cultură în contextul traducerii unui concept considerat a fi definitiv pentru cultura Scandinavă. Deoarece utilizarea limbii implică un înalt nivel de contextualitate, procesul de traducere tinde să devină un efort de a înțelege modalitatea prin care identitatea culturală, valorile și atitudinile sunt exprimate prin intermediul limbii. Pentru a argumenta interconexiunile din limbă și cultură, acest studiu și-a propus să ofere o perspectivă a situației lingvistice din Norvegia.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *interpretare culturală, limbă, norvegiană, daneză, hygge, reprezentări culturale.*

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the role of culture in translation focusing on *kos/hygge*, a concept specific to the Norwegian and Danish cultures that has gained worldwide attention in 2016. The first section reviews the underlying concepts and approaches to be found in the field of translation studies. The second section acknowledges the fact that all communication is placed in a social and a cultural context and that has multiple implications for conducting a culturally appropriate translation. The last section explores the concept of *hygge* that is characteristic for the Norwegian and the Danish culture.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

In the globalized world, where advanced means of communication and improved modes of travel contribute to the extension of social relations across traditional borders, the translating and interpreting market is expected to increase. Translation studies, in interdisciplinary view, are influenced by various fields of study that include linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, comparative literature and history. According to Humphrey and Frank, the recent expansion of translation studies “can be seen as a product of work in cultural studies and literary theory, but also in policy studies and political theory”<sup>3</sup>.

Nord<sup>4</sup> suggests that traditional approaches to translation usually view translations as being a reproduction of an existing source text, where the source text is the main yardstick against which one measures the level of equivalence of a translation and judges the translator's decisions. Traditional approaches to translation were in favour of the word-for-word translation, viewed the act of translating as being a linear one and considered that the source text had just one dimension.

Nowadays, translation is no longer perceived as a mere cross-linguistic activity and has gained the status of “cross-cultural communication”<sup>5</sup>. According to Nord “translating means comparing cultures i.e. interpreting source-culture

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<sup>3</sup> H. Tonkin, M. E Frank, *The Translator as Mediator of Cultures* [2010], John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2010, p. viii.

<sup>4</sup> C. Nord, “Translating as a purposeful activity: A Prospective Approach”, *Teflin Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 [2006], pp. 131-143 (Accessed 18.09.2017), <http://journal.teflin.org/index.php/journal/article/view/65/254>.

<sup>5</sup> A. Gelavizh, Z. S. Saleh, Assemi Arezoo, D. S. Saadat. “Language, Translation, and Culture”. In *International Conference on Language, Medias and Culture IPEDR* vol. 33 [2012], pp. 83-87. IACSIT Press, Singapore, 2012, p. 84.

phenomena in the light of one's own knowledge of that culture, from either inside or outside, depending on whether one translates from or into one's native language and culture"<sup>6</sup>. Because translation is essentially a process of communication mediated by language, it is open to interpretations and negotiations of the source text. Translation constitutes a complex process of transferring messages from the source culture and language into the target culture and language. In addition, Lindgren suggests that because the author can express him/herself in countless ways, "translating represents endless possibilities of choices"<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the translator plays an active role in trying to transfer, in a functionally adequate way, the meaning and various culture-specific elements from the source language into the target language.

Vermeer<sup>8</sup> argues that translation implies, from a traditional point of view, a linguistic transfer to which a cultural transfer is added since language is part of culture. In translation, the linguistic component and the cultural component have established a relationship based on complementarity. Therefore, translation is valuable and enriching because it provides readers with the opportunity to experience different cultures and world views. Through translation, one escapes the borders imposed by one's culture.

The acknowledgment of the fact that "both the source text and the translated text may represent very diverse cultural orientations and values"<sup>9</sup> produced the right conditions for the emergence of the *cultural approach* in translation studies. Eugene Albert Nida, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevre are important representatives who paved the way for the cultural approach in translation studies and who supported the shift from linguistic to cultural translation. The cultural approach in translation began to put an emphasis on the social and cultural background of the target language and on the way in which this context was likely to be understood by the intended audience. Therefore, literal translation lost much of its support in favour for a translation that would reconsider the function of the translated text.

In their book, *Constructing cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, Bassnett and Lefevre suggest that the research performed in the field of translation studies has taken "a 'cultural turn', because people in the field began to realize [...] that translations are never produced in a vacuum and that they are also never

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<sup>6</sup> C. Nord, *Translating as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approaches explained* [1997], St. Jerome, Manchester, 1997, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> J. E. Bøe Lindgren, "Øversetteren - en løgner?", *Språknytt* 2/2014, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> H. Vermeer, "Is Translation a Linguistic or a Cultural Process?", *Itha do.Desterro* 28, [1992], pp. 37-49, 1992, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> E. A. Nida, C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, [2003], 4<sup>th</sup> impression, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2003, p. vii.

received in a vacuum”<sup>10</sup>. The emergence of the idea of ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies has improved the status of translations in such a way that they were no longer expected to be a mere copy of the source texts. The cultural environment, the social realities, the historical context and even linguistic barriers influence the way meaning is transferred from the source language to the target language.

### **Interconnections between Language and Culture**

In today’s world, influenced by the globalization of markets and the growth of scientific knowledge and technological advances, good communication is of paramount importance locally, nationally and globally. Language is our primary source of communication. It is a tool that enables people to share ideas and thoughts with others. Failure to communicate in a manner in which one is understood constitutes a considerable drawback which has a direct impact on the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor(s).

Language and culture are closely intertwined because language, as discourse, is a “meaning-making system that links text and social context in multiple ways”<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, in order to translate linguistic content from the source text, the translator has to demonstrate knowledge of customs, beliefs and norms in the target language and culture.

This paper explores the concept of *hygge* which can be found both in the Norwegian and the Danish culture. The rationale for choosing this particular concept is presented in the following section named *Kos/Hygge – Trying to Grasp the Norwegian-Danish Concept of Well-being*. We consider that this concept comprises both linguistic and cultural references that justify our discussion regarding the interconnections between language and culture. Because language use is contextual, one has to understand how values and attitudes are expressed through language. The fact that the concept *hygge* is characteristic to the Danish and Norwegian culture makes it even more difficult to find an equivalent in another language.

In what follows, we bring into discussion the linguistic situation in Norway in order to provide evidence that supports the close relationship between language and culture. Norway has two official forms of written Norwegian: *Bokmål* (literally

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<sup>10</sup> A. Lefevre, S. Bassnett, “Where are we in Translation Studies?”, pp. 1-24, [1998]. In *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, ed. Susan Bassnett, Andre Lefevre Multilingual Matters Ltd.: UK, USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, 1998, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> C. Kramsch, “History and Memory in the Development of Intercultural Competence”, pp. 23-38, [2013]. In *Language and Intercultural Communication in the New Era*, ed. Sharifian Farzad, Jamarani Maryam, Routledge, New York.

called “book tongue”) and *Nynorsk* (literally called “new Norwegian”). Norway is a country that encourages the use of dialects because these make direct reference to the identity of an individual. Norwegians are proud of their diverse dialects which are not considered to be varieties with low social status. The tendency is to prefer one’s own dialect and consider that it contributes to the diversity of linguistic and cultural expressions. Sjøkkeland<sup>12</sup> suggests that language incorporates both national and personal identity and therefore there is no “bad Norwegian”<sup>13</sup> [Dårleg norsk]. The fact that there are two official forms of written Norwegian can be, on the one hand, challenging but, on the other hand, it promotes tolerance for language variation. It is not uncommon for news and programs on The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, church service and even theatrical representations to take place in each individual’s dialect. Likewise, it makes communication more realistic and argues that fact that language takes place both in a social and a cultural context.

### ***Kos/Hygge* – Trying to Grasp the Norwegian-Danish Concept of Well-being**

This section will focus on a Norwegian-Danish concept that has become extremely popular throughout the world last year, particularly since it embodies a way of living closer to tradition, rather alienated for the consumerist society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This concept is relevant for our study as it is accessible worldwide and can be considered defining for the Scandinavian culture. However, it is challenging to offer an appropriate translation into English or other non-Scandinavian language as it encompasses an attitude towards life that is specific to the North-European world. In order to grasp its meaning, one has to be initiated in its representations.

When trying to translate so-called ‘untranslatable’ words, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis comes into mind, as it claims that the way we see the world is fundamentally shaped by language<sup>14</sup>. Languages would thus comprise different conceptual worlds, making translation almost impossible. Edward Sapir said in 1929<sup>15</sup>:

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<sup>12</sup> M. Sjøkkeland, Språk og kultur. *Vegar i det norske samfunnet*, [2012], Potal Forlag, Norvegia, 2012, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Chi Luu, “The Cozy Linguistics of Hygge and Other «Untranslatable» Words”, JSTOR Daily, December 7, 2016, retrieved from <https://daily.jstor.org/cozy-linguistics-hygge-untranslatable-words/> (20.09.2017).

<sup>15</sup> The essay first appeared as “The Status of Linguistics as a Science”, in *Language*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Dec., 1929), pp. 207-214, published by the Linguistic Society of America.

The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.<sup>16</sup>

Their hypothesis received its criticism, the model of meaning, although fascinating, is considered wrong since it does not raise questions of voice, register and code, lacking any intertextual dimension<sup>17</sup>. However, it is interesting for this study as it supports the strong relationship between place and language, enhancing the role of language in having a certain view of the world. Translating culture becomes hence a prerequisite for understanding the worlds shaped by other languages.

Returning to the chosen concept, it is important to refer to the origin of the word. *Hygge* is one of the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 shortlist choices and its definition is “a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being (regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture)”<sup>18</sup>. The Norwegian Encyclopaedia (*Store Norske Leksikon*) offers the following definition: “Cosiness, a feeling of well-being, relaxed and friendly atmosphere, especially together with family or friends, likely in activities such as having dinner, discussions, games and other similar activities.”<sup>19</sup>. Although the concept has been promoted as “the Danish recipe for happiness”, the word stems from the Old Norse *hyggja*<sup>20</sup>, meaning “thought”, “mind”, “reason”, and has been borrowed in Danish from Norwegian during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the word has gained in Danish wider use in far more contexts than in Norwegian<sup>21</sup>. Along with *hygge*, the noun *kos*, with the verb *å kose seg*, the adjective *koselig* would be the most accurate Norwegian correspondent, defined as “cosy, pleasant”<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language and Personality*, selected essays edited by David G. Mandelbaum, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1956, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> G. M. Hyde, “The Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis and the Translation Muddle”, *Translation and Literature*, Vol. 2 (1993), published by Edinburgh University Press, p. 6, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339646> (20.09.2017).

<sup>18</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016> (16.09.2017).

<sup>19</sup> Our translation, original text: “Hygge, kos, kjensle av velvære, avslappa og vennleg stemning, særleg i samvære med familie eller vener, gjerne i aktivitetar som måltid, samtale, spel og liknande.”, *Store Norske Leksikon*, retrieved from <https://snl.no/hygge> (16.09.2017).

<sup>20</sup> *Nynorskordboka* and *Bokmålsordboka*, Dictionaries of *nynorsk* and *bokmål*, retrieved from <http://ordbok.uib.no/perl/ordbok.cgi?OPP=Hygge&begge=+> (16.09.2017).

<sup>21</sup> *Store Norske Leksikon*, retrieved from <https://snl.no/hygge> (16.09.2017).

<sup>22</sup> Our translation from Norwegian, original text: “hyggelig, trivelig”, *Nynorskordboka* and *Bokmålsordboka*, *op. cit.*, retrieved from [http://ordbok.uib.no/perl/ordbok.cgi?OPP=koselig&ant\\_bokmaal=5&ant\\_nynorsk=5&begge=+&ordbok=begge](http://ordbok.uib.no/perl/ordbok.cgi?OPP=koselig&ant_bokmaal=5&ant_nynorsk=5&begge=+&ordbok=begge) (16.09.2017).

In order to achieve an objective overview on this concept, it is important to analyse it from the perspective of egalitarianism, home-centredness<sup>23</sup>, or sameness (discussed by Inger Sjørsløv in her chapter “Alterity as Celebration, Alterity as Threat: A Comparison of Grammars between Brazil and Denmark” published in the volume *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*<sup>24</sup>, where she refers to the epitome of sameness as celebration), central aspects of the Scandinavian culture. Candles – which are considered compulsory accessories when it comes to having a *koselig/hygge* time – can be regarded as elements of enacting sameness, according to Sjørsløv: “The very light that the candle shines upon all alike contributes to an encompassing grammar of ‘sameness’ and the dominant structures behind it.”<sup>25</sup>

The long, harsh and dark Scandinavian winters have forced people living there to spend more time indoors, to build close relationships and to strengthen their communities, to work together for the common goals, to be more preoccupied with having comfortable and cosy homes, “We have a culture extremely focused on the home. People meet more at home here in Scandinavia than in other parts of the world.”<sup>26</sup>, says the Danish social anthropologist Jeppe Trolle Linnet, who has conducted research on consumer culture and has studied the cultural concept of *hygge*. Homes are thus essential when it comes to understanding *kos/hygge*, as they are the most common setting for experiencing an intimate form of socialization<sup>27</sup>. By spending time with family and friends in a welcoming environment, people experience closeness and learn to appreciate balance and moderation. Again, its meaning for the Scandinavians stems from their need to promote equality and well-being for all.

When asked if outsiders can understand what *kos* and *hygge* mean for Norwegian and Danes, the sociologist Kjetil Rolness gives the following answer:

To understand what exactly it is about can be difficult. *Kosen* is like a reversed fridge, warm on the inside and cold on the outside. We feel it becomes less *koselig* when strangers come, we then become a little

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<sup>23</sup> Jeppe Trolle Linnet, “Money can’t buy me *hygge*: Danish middle-class consumption, egalitarianism and the sanctity of inner space”, *Social Analysis*, Volume 55, Issue 2, Summer 2011, Berghahn Journals, New York, Oxford, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Inger Sjørsløv, “Alterity as Celebration, Alterity as Threat: A Comparison of Grammars between Brazil and Denmark”, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*, edited by Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich, Berghahn Books, New York, 2004, p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> Inger Sjørsløv, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Our translation from Norwegian, original text: “Vi har en veldig hjemmefokusert kultur. Man møtes mer i hjemmet i Skandinavia enn andre steder i verden.”, Elisabeth Ulla Uksnøy, «Hygge» er et av årets nyord i Storbritannia, NRK, 3.11.2016, [https://www.nrk.no/kultur/\\_hygge\\_-er-et-av-arets-nyord-i-storbritannia-1.13209312](https://www.nrk.no/kultur/_hygge_-er-et-av-arets-nyord-i-storbritannia-1.13209312) (19.09.2017).

<sup>27</sup> Jeppe Trolle Linnet, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

insecure and clumsy. Seen like this, *kos* can function as a wall towards others. It is an adverse effect often unacknowledged.<sup>28</sup>

Although this might indicate that there is more to this concept than just the popular perception that *hygge* could be the ultimate recipe for happiness, the cultural values within it make it highly appealing to the modern world growing devoid of sense. Adding more to this, Rolness states that “*Kos* creates a micro cosmos. A private world of peace, individuality and harmony. Norwegians who *kose* themselves actually constitute the world’s most subdued and least organized resistance movement. They stand against the modern world’s coldness, cynicism, alienation and fragmentation”.<sup>29</sup> *Kos/hygge* can be thus perceived as “a mode of withdrawal from alienating conditions of modernity.”<sup>30</sup>

This concept is of tremendous importance for the Scandinavians because everyone can enjoy *kos/hygge*, independent of the social status or wealth, no matter the colour of the skin. When trying to translate it, one should bear in mind that *kos/hygge* is all about togetherness and treasuring the small joys of life while helping uneven differences and build bridges between people, and, why not, between cultures.

### Concluding remarks

This paper laid focus on the fact that the process of translating constitutes a complex transfer of messages from the source culture and language into the target culture and language. The theoretical underpinnings presented in this paper provided arguments for sustaining the cultural turn in translation. The acknowledgement of the manifold connections between language and culture contributes to the understanding that the process of translation is valuable and enriching because it provides the audience with the opportunity to experience different cultures and world views. By analysing *kos/hygge*, the Norwegian-Danish cultural concept of enjoying a simple, cosy existence, this study has tried to

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<sup>28</sup> Our translation from Norwegian, original text: “Å skjønne hva det egentlig handler om, kan være vanskelig, sier Rolness. - Kosen er som et omvendt kjøleskap, varm inni og kald utenpå. Vi føler det blir mindre koselig når det kommer fremmedfolk, da blir vi litt utrygge og keitete. Sånn sett kan kosen fungere som en mur mot andre. Det er en bivirkning som ofte ikke erkjennes.”, Are Møster Ottesen, “Høytid for kos”, *Aftenposten*, 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2013, <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/ka7kQ/Hoytid-for-kos> (19.09.2017).

<sup>29</sup> Our translation from Norwegian, original text: “Kosen skaper et mikrokosmos. En privat verden av ro, individualitet og harmoni. Nordmenn som koser seg utgjør faktisk verdens mest stillferdige og minst organiserte motstandsbevegelse. De gjør motstand mot den moderne verdens kulde, kynisme, fremmedgjøring og fragmentering.”, Are Møster Ottesen, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Jeppe Trolle Linnet, *op. cit.*, p. 21.



demonstrate that insights into cultural specificity are essential when it comes to translation. In order to grasp the meaning of this popular concept, one needs to look into its complex cultural representations.

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