

# ***Translating Cultures***

**An Introduction  
for  
Translators, Interpreters and Mediators**

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### 8.3.1 Culture-Bound Lexis

In Sue Townsend's (1985) popular work of fiction, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4*, Adrian has a friend by the name of Maxwell House. The translator can chunk laterally, and quite legitimately simply borrow the name: "Maxwell House". This would, in general, be the most logical strategy with regard to personal names.

However, the fictional name here is not casual, and nor are the connotations. Christopher Taylor (1990:106-7) notes that the contraposition of Maxwell (first name) and House (surname) create a comic effect. Maxwell is a normal first name, yet the collocation with House accesses a totally different frame, that of instant or freeze-dried coffee. So, a translator, wishing to retain the comic effect will need to isolate the contributing factors by chunking up. We find, by chunking up, that "Maxwell House" is 'a member of' (the class of):

- personal name  
(name + surname)
- brand of coffee  
(*Maxwell House* instant coffee)

If we chunk down, we notice that the personal name *Maxwell House* 'is composed of' (connotes):

- Name: *Maxwell*<sup>5</sup>  
distinction, class (UK and US)  
comedy (US)
- *Maxwell + House* together:  
is a brand name for a beverage  
has a comic effect

The translator with these semantic constructs can then begin to work on the target culture. S/he will have a feel for what is needed from the variety of frames

<sup>5</sup> The following excerpt from a baby names' list gives a rough idea of the qualities of Maxwell (The TV series was only shown in America, though): "**origin:** Old English, **meaning:** from the influential man's well, **traits:** Maxwell strikes most people as a name for either a wealthy, quiet, older gentleman or a bungling, overconfident detective, like TV's Maxwell Smart". <http://www.americanbaby.com/ab/ab/babynames/babyName.jhtml?babynameld=13661>

More recently, well after Townsend's book was published, the word 'Maxwell' accessed another frame for the British: Robert Maxwell, the owner of the Mirror Group of Newspapers and embezzler of the Pension Funds. He made front-page news with his suicide, and the subsequent criminal investigations into his family's dealings.

making up the virtual text and will then open up, for example, Italian frames by asking an appropriate procedural question. In this case, the chunking down question to ask is: "what is an example in the Italian culture of a brand name of coffee, which could be read as a distinct name + surname, and create a comic effect?" An answer might well be *Illy Caffè*, Italy's most up-market brand of coffee.

This method would result in a domesticated or communicative (i.e. target culture oriented) translation. The virtual text, though, would tell us that Maxwell House is English, and that the whole context of culture is British. Clearly, having a friend called *Illy Caffè* would give him a continental flavour.

The natural step is then to ask, chunking sideways: "What is at the same level as Maxwell House and *Illy Caffè*?", i.e., what would create a comic effect for the target reader, but at the same time would remain source text oriented? An inspired answer was "Teo Lipton" (Corbolante 1987). For an Italian, Lipton Tea, or rather *Tè Lipton* is synonymous with Anglo-Saxon culture. The advertising of the product in Italy is also deliberately comic: an American speaking Italian with a strong mid-Atlantic accent.

The diagram below shows the principal stages in chunking:

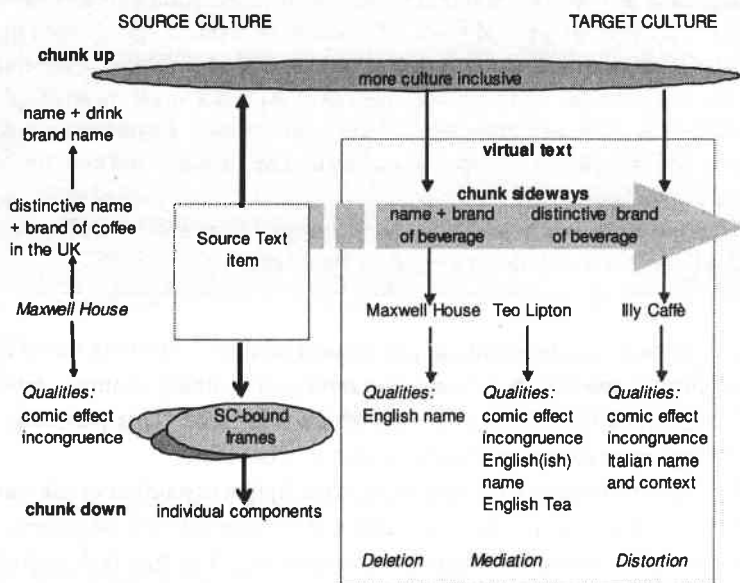


Figure 29. Translating and Chunking: Maxwell House

### 8.3.2 Culture-bound Behaviour

The following is an extract from *The Guardian* (22/03/93), which gives an account of a terrorist attack in Belfast in 1993. The journalist gives a little background to the scene after the bomb attack (emphasis added):