Translating Cultures:
The Translator as an Intercultural Mediator

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Abstract
The academic contributions that suggest a conception of the role of the translator as an intercultural mediator are numerous, and all of them seem suitable once we perceive translation practice as an intercultural activity. In this paper I will summarise the work by different authors who consider translation from an intercultural perspective and who foster the idea that the translator has become an intercultural expert who mediates between cultures. I will also suggest the reading of some recent works on the topic.

Introduction

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2008), to mediate (as a verb) means “to bring accord out of by action as an intermediary,” “to act as intermediary agent in bringing, effecting, or communicating,” or “to reconcile differences.” Each one of these meanings can be applied to the conception of the current role of the translator not just as a professional who reformulates in language B what was originally generated in language A, but also as an agent who acts as an intermediary between two cultures and who tries to reconcile those differences that can act as communication barriers.

The academic contributions that point toward a conception of the role of the translator as an intercultural mediator or expert are many, and all of them seem acceptable if our standpoint is to perceive translation practice as an intercultural activity.

In this article I will review the work of different authors who (from different yet related fields of study) consider translation from an intercultural perspective and who contribute to the idea that the translator has become an intercultural expert who mediates between cultures within a globalised world. In order to illustrate this idea and in an attempt to show the development of this perspective, I will refer to voices from textual and discursive approaches (such as Hatim and Mason, 1990 or Agost, 1999), from communicative approaches (such as Mayoral et al., 1988), from descriptivist approaches (such as Toury, 1995), from sociological approaches (such as Santamaria, 2001), from anthropological approaches (such as Snell-Hornby, 1999), from ethnographic approaches (such as Castro-Paniagua, 2000), and even from the field of international marketing (such as...
Cateora and Graham, 1999). I will finish by suggesting the reading of some recent works dealing with the topic under discussion.

**Translation and Culture**

There are many definitions of *culture*. For example, let us consider the following one (Samovar and Porter, 1997, p.12-13):

> the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

This definition of *culture* can be very useful when the unavoidable relationship between this concept and translation practice is considered. Castro-Paniagua (2000, p.1) reminds us that Nida (1964) was one of the first authors to refer directly to the cross-cultural side of translation. In his work, Nida draws our attention to “the danger of subjectivity in translating” and to the fact that “it is almost inevitable that translators be affected by their own personal set of values,” and he advises that “they should attempt firmly to avoid any interference from the particular cultural background.”

According to Castro-Paniagua (2000, p.1-2), a cultural aspect which is considered ideal in a given society may not necessarily be considered as such in another one. Thus, “impartiality and objectivity may be difficult to achieve.” We could add that, given the current multicultural nature of many societies, this can happen not only between two different societies, but also among the different groups or subcultures that make up these societies. As Castro-Paniagua explains, comparing different perceptions of the world can become an unpleasant experience, especially if the analysis of the cultural traits of our own social group leads to the discovery of certain areas that we would rather deem nonexistent. He also claims that “Language is the reflection of a culture.” Consequently, every time we translate we make “a cross-cultural comparison through a linguistic filter” and compare “languages, cultures and societies.”

Marco (2002, p.203) alludes to the many researchers who currently accentuate the cultural aspects of translation. Even traditionally linguistic approaches (such as German functionalism) perceive translation as an intercultural communication process in which two parts are involved: on the one hand, the production of the source text
in a source communicative situation and, on the other, the production of the target text in a target communicative situation (Nord, 1991, p.7).

Marco also points out the irreversible *cultural turn* that Translation Studies has experienced mainly from the 1980s onwards. He outlines the way in which this turn has progressed, from which we may highlight the following key points (2002, p.203-205):

- From an anthropological position, Snell-Hornby (1988, p.46) states that translation takes place between cultures, and not just between languages. Hence, the translator should not only be bilingual, but also bicultural.
- In spite of their linguistic orientation, authors such as Hatim and Mason (1990), Bell (1991), Baker (1992), or Neubert and Shreve (1992) explain that consideration of the cultural factor is crucial so that the context in which we translate and receive texts does not remain incomplete.
- For Carbonell (1999) it is possible to identify the activation of the cultural turn with the appearance of the Manipulation School. Authors such as Marco find this identification remarkable, as the concept of *culture* is probably not one of the most prominent notions within the polysystem paradigm, in particular if compared with the leading role of other concepts such as *description*, *target pole*, *system*, or *norm* (regardless of the obvious cultural approach they all entail).
- Katan’s work (1999) seeks to give rigour and coherence to the analysis of the translation/culture tandem relationship.

For descriptivist Toury (1995, p.56), translation is an activity “which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions, i.e., at least two sets of norm-systems on each level.” Similarly, Hermans (1999, p.89) argues that “Since translation operates in and on existing discourses while fashioning new texts after models belonging to other discourses, individual cultures or groups may develop different attitudes with regard to these potentially disruptive new arrivals.”

On the whole, considering translation from an intercultural perspective seems not only possible, but even convenient. This idea relates to the confluence that at some point takes place between Cultural Studies and Translation Studies. The concept of *culture* then emerges as significant to translation, and translational activity can be considered as a clear case of interaction between cultures.
The Mediating Role of the Translator

Once we look at translation as an intercultural activity, our next logical step should be to reflect on the translator’s role within this approach. The contributions that imply a conception of the translator as an intercultural expert or mediator are many. For example, let us mention Snell-Hornby’s work (1999), in which she depicts the translator as an expert in intercultural communication working in an internationalized world.

This type of approach seems reasonably appropriate once we regard translation practice as an intercultural exchange. To support this position, I mention below some of the assertions made by various writers:

- Mayoral et al. (1988, p.357) conceive the translation process as a communicative act, and they define the figure of the translator as “a decoder of the source language as well as an encoder of the target language,” and at the same time “a receptor of the message in the source culture as well as a source of the message in the target culture.”

- From their textual and discursive position, Hatim and Mason (1990, p.223-224) say that the translator mediates not only in the sense that he or she “reads in order to produce” and “decodes in order to re-encode,” but also in the sense that he or she mediates between cultures, given that he or she tries “to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of the transfer of meaning.” Hence, not only a bilingual ability but also a bicultural vision are crucial to the translator.

- From a descriptivist point of view, Toury (1995, p.53) also seems in favour of the role of the translator as a cultural mediator. According to Toury, despite the “explanatory power with respect to translational phenomena” of disciplines such as Linguistics, Text Linguistics, Contrastive Textology, or Pragmatics, “being a translator cannot be reduced to the mere generation of utterances which would be considered ‘translations’ within any of these disciplines.” He also claims that “Translation activities should rather be regarded as having cultural significance” and that “Consequently, ‘translatorship’ amounts first and foremost to being able to play a social role.”

- Agost uses Hatim and Mason’s model (1990) and refers (1999, p.100) to the high degree of mastery that the translator must have of the different sociocultural aspects of the source language (and, we could also say, of the target language).
Another author who mentions the role of the translator as a cultural mediator is Santamaria. She suggests that when the references to be translated do not exist in the target culture, the translator must provide them with some symbolic value (2001, p.246).

Castro-Paniagua (2000, p.24) goes further and suggests that “a translator should be an ethnographer.” He believes that the translator will have to interpret correctly not only the semantic information, but also the inherent cultural codes. In his view, “the translator must adequately transmit and adapt [the] message across cultures,” so he or she “need[s] to have a deep knowledge of the cultural frames [he or she] will be handling.” Castro-Paniagua also states that it is not the translator’s fault if it is not possible to transcribe a cultural sign or if a given text lacks universality. For him, “A work’s potentiality to achieve universal dimensions will rest upon the literary genius of a writer,” and the translator’s job will be to transmit it.

Similar approaches can be found in other fields of study. For example, Cateora and Graham, who devote their research to the analysis of international marketing, include some ideas that are relevant here. They (1999, p.85-86) maintain that “What a marketer is constantly dealing with is the culture of the people” and that “When a promotional message is written, symbols recognizable and meaningful to the [culture] must be used.” Likewise, in a cultural context “The marketer’s efforts are judged […] for acceptance, resistance, or rejection” of a given product. We can clearly apply these ideas to the world of translation. As already suggested, the translator should control or at least have some knowledge not only of the source culture, but also of his or her own culture. If we consider any translated product a marketable product, we can then say that a translation’s success or failure is determined by acceptance or rejection (just as it would happen when marketing any other product).

As regards language, Cateora and Graham (1999, p.94) refer to the importance for the marketing expert to learn the language of the market in which he or she plans to do business. It goes without saying that this idea is also applicable to the translator. They also argue that “Language may be one of the most difficult cultural elements to master,” and indicate that sometimes it can be advisable to resort to a cultural translator (“a person who translates not only among languages but also among different ways of thinking and among different cultures”). The cultural translator could help avoid obscene,
offensive, or simply ridiculous results. In a word, they also support the figure of the translator (or interpreter) as a cultural expert or mediator.

Summary

I have presented different ideas relating to the relationship between culture and translation and to the conception of the translator as an intercultural mediator or expert. Among these ideas, it is possible to highlight the following:

- The double role of the translator as a decoder/encoder and as a receptor/sender
- The translator as an expert in intercultural communication who performs his or her job in an internationalized world
- The role of the translator not only as a mediator between languages but also between cultures
- The translator's bilingual ability and bicultural vision
- The translator’s control of the different sociocultural aspects that surround not only the source language but also the target language
- The translator’s responsibility in the acceptance or rejection of a translated product by the target culture
- The possible consideration of the translator as an ethnographer, in the sense that he or she must interpret accurately not only semantic information, but also inherent cultural codes
- The social role of the translation activities

All these ideas, and others, contribute to a full understanding of the way in which the concept of the translator’s role has evolved and of the cultural turn that started to affect the field of Translation Studies mainly from the 1980s onwards.

Suggested Further Readings

Besides the different works cited so far, there are a number of other recently published titles which also deal with some of the issues considered in this paper. For example:

- Herbrechter’s work (2002) gathers together a series of articles dealing with the concept of interdisciplinarity or the relationship between Cultural Studies and Translation Studies.
• The book edited by Ortega (2007) embraces a review of the achievements and future challenges of the cultural turn and a consideration of its influence on the field of Translation Studies.
• In Martínez-Sierra (2008) it is possible to find a descriptive and discursive study on the translation of humour in audiovisual texts from an intercultural perspective.

Bibliography


