TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

It is often assumed that national identity is homogeneous, if not linked up with factors related to ethnicity and race and “manifested in a particular language and culture”. In the process of translation, as various new territories are brought into sharp focus, identities are removed, making way for new ones. This is because change is achieved in terms of both quantity and quality. Irregular, eccentric twists are often unavoidable and called for when translating. If on the one hand translation makes the creation of new areas of identity easy, on the other hand existing ones have to open up and develop as host languages and cultures, the result of which may be power inequality. The description below should offer a glimpse into the difficulty translators meet with when it comes to wielding and negotiating meaning between two languages.

What Do We Mean by Cultural Identity?

“The cultural identity of a specific group or society is an image referring to external as well as internal characteristics of that group”. Notwithstanding, every culture must be limited to a time and a particular space so that we may refer to that culture as far as its past or future are concerned and so, track the changes that took place within it. Now, as organizing systems go, we all know how important language is (for language too is a system). People make use of language to understand the world and express themselves within the cultural group they belong to or within a group they wish to become part of. The cultural identity of every society is made up of a number of elements and concepts, all of which join forces and pull together to build meaning in that culture for each of its members. Yet, the same sign may have different meanings for the members of the group. Take for instance the old flag of South Africa. A white South African might see it as a symbol of political oppression, while for another it could serve as a reminder of a prosperous time.

But signs are not always static in nature: people in a certain cultural group may come up with their own signs for unity or solidarity purposes. Consequently, cultures act as a skeleton for a great many sub-cultures, each with its own peculiarity. All this further complicates the work of translators. Naturally, the “Holy Grail of translation” is to yield work that represents the equivalent of the source text, however hazy the meaning of “equivalent”.

A different approach claims that, in fact, it is difference from others that determines cultural identity. By applying this definition to the process of translation, translators often find that what bilingual dictionaries offer are not counterparts, which are absent altogether from the target language and sometimes from its culture, but mere definitions: the English counterpart offered by a bilingual dictionary for *banderilla* (Santoyo 2010) is: “small dart with a banderole placed into the nape of a bull during the second part of a bullfight”. In the absence of a matching counterpart, we are offered a mere explanation, defining or describing, but indicating no translation for it. The matter becomes even more irksome when the dictionary does not even provide an explanation for the looked-up term. Another example (Santoyo 2010): the French are aware of the existence of a character originating in the established folklore, going by the name of *le marchand de sable*. However, there is no such counterpart in the Spanish language, or culture for that matter. The said character is “a kind person who visits children at night to help them sleep peacefully, he scatters a fine veil of sand on the children’s eyelids until they close completely”. In Spanish, and perhaps many other languages and cultures, no such character matches the description. Hence, the typical uncertainty of a translator who is required to find the counterpart of *marchand de sable* in another language. These culture-constrained elements of language are far greater that one might say at first sight. Cultural differences do matter, and languages register them in every nook and cranny.

For instance, various language areas have been noticed to differ universally: in 1964 John Catford came up with a classification thereof, ranging from “coins, measurements, institutions (“college” or “high school” in English) to clothing”. Other examples include “time division, jobs, positions and professions, food, drink, baking, particular aspects of social life”, to name just a few. Gastronomy received special attention from linguists everywhere, as it changes depending on individual ways of preparation, but also on the ingredients which are culture-specific. Musical vocabulary, sports, dances and art terms are only a small part of the set of differences that spice up a translator’s daily work, all of which shape a unique profile of the cultural identity of the language in question. What is more, these cultural slices are not flawless either: linguists urge us to think of a category as diverse and complex as Italian pasta, which may not have permeated other cultures from the very beginning. In Romania, for example, before 1990 and perhaps even a few years later, most children would eat *fidea* or *macarone*. Nowadays, with globalization and unconstrained merchandising, the realm of Italian pasta is becoming bit by bit commonplace in everyone’s cooking style, in every cuisine. Beside the usual *fidea* and *macarone*, we now buy, prepare and eat *tagliatelle, spaghetti, penne, fusili*, you name it. If these terms become accommodated in the new culture, the new language needs the necessary words for the respective objects/concepts. Here is where translators must work their magic.

We often ask ourselves what the author would have done about finding the right equivalent if they had to translate their work into another language. After all, they are the only ones who know what they meant and which word would best fit the bill. Surprising as it may seem, quite a few authors have translated some of their works themselves into a different language. They go as far back as the first century and many more as far back as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. A different group of authors is made up of literary figures in more recent times: for instance, the dramatist, novelist, poet and short story writer Luigi...
Pirandello, who wrote in Sicilian dialect, only to later translate his work into Italian. Another example: the Irish avant-garde novelist, playwright and poet Samuel Beckett, who lived in Paris for most of his life, first wrote in English and translated his work into French, but then had to write in French and translate himself back into English. Both authors were Nobel Prize winners in 1934 and 1969, respectively. Even if they were never honored with the Nobel Prize, such authors as Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, William Beckford, all authors who translated their own work into other languages, were just as worthy. James Joyce even went as far as translating bits of Finnegans Wake into Italian (two long sections of the chapter entitled “Anna Livia Plurabelle”). Nonetheless, translations of this type are claimed to have been rarely mentioned in translation studies.

Reasons for which translations are used include economic factors, pursuit of knowledge (be it in science or literature) or the struggle for power. Translation may ease the development of a territorial identity and in time the respective territory comes to be associated with great literature works. Typical cases include Germany in the 18th century or England in the 15th century. Both established a national literature by means of translating “higher literature”. Thus, much appreciated linguistic work builds up, licenses and validates the literature and the understanding of a nation. Yet, certain spaces and times deal with translation more easily than others. A famous example is that of the trade on the Silk Route, which fostered cultural transfer between China and India; or the convergence of Jews, Arabs, and Christians on the territory of Spain in the 13th century. At other times, the prolonged presence of a group in a particular space may result in the language of the group acquiring the status of official language. These are all examples of how the cultural and linguistic arena can be redefined.

However, when cultures are impossible to translate, translations can build and change meaning and space: “the translation of the Waitangi Treaty in 1840 done in one night by Rev. Henry Williams displaced Maori sovereignty and handed it to the British almost overnight” (Fenton and Moon 2002 in Santoyo 2010). New Zealand would become part of the British Empire – the reason: the notions of ‘possession’ and ‘sovereignty’ were inadequately spelled out. Even though Henry Williams knew that the Maori was an oral culture, evidence suggests that when Williams assembled the chiefs to deliver them the treaty, he “interpolated the text with oral explanations” without including “the important wider intent of the treaty” (Fenton and Moon 2002 in Santoyo 2010).

Text Operations

The most significant effects of translation can be seen in the operations that take place inside texts. Most people usually believe that specialized translations require no reorganization or replacement of identities; yet specialized translations do not remain unaffected by cross-cultural differences. Examples range from highly specialized translations to surveys translated from English into other languages – all of which reveal difficulties about what is “not relevant to a certain cultural group” (Santoyo 2010). It seems that translating surveys or questionnaires creates “measurement issues and analytic inaccuracies” (Santoyo 2010). The explanation consists of lack of lexical symmetry, lack of appropriate “tone, language, lingo, and connotations”, even errors (e.g., “hot dog” was translated as “warm puppies”). The process of translation is further complicated by the existence of dialects, which are extremely difficult to master as a translator, because of physical distance, obviously, but also because the differences between dialects and the standard variety are not always easy to grasp – word order may change and vocabulary may sometimes be quite opaque.

Textual operations may sometimes affect interpersonal relationships as well. Politeness patterns, for example, register one of the most widely encountered cross-cultural differences. Many speakers/readers of origins other than English hardly grasp the politeness strategies of the English speakers/original texts they come across. We see, therefore, that translation has a two-edged aspect to it: on the one hand, it helps refine and promote literature, but on the other hand, it may hinder accuracy and the speaker’s intentions, both orally and in writing. One of the longest and richest traditions in translating texts is that of the Chinese, for whom the act of translation has resulted in both advantages and disadvantages, regression and progression. It appears that a great deal of concepts in the Chinese literature have emerged as a consequence of translation. In addition, there is also the case of numbers being placed before titles of chapters, which by way of translation replaced the older, traditional practice of inserting couplets before a new section of the text.

These and many other cases illustrate the great power that the act of translation has to shape and redefine set patterns across cultures. Thus, the idea of identity plays a vital and active part in almost any translation task, irrespective of the reasons behind it. It is not only involved in literal and abstract interpretation, but also instrumental in shaping attitudes towards the material in question.

References:

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