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# The Role of Culture in Translation

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## Abstract

This paper first illustrates the crucial interplay between culture and language and then emphasizes the role of culture in translation. Within the scholars in the field of translation studies a myriad number of individuals have theorized about the role of culture in translation and each of them has his /her own viewpoint, this study has tried to review them briefly and at the end some strategies for the translation of culture-specific items have been proposed.

**Keywords:** Culture, Translation, Culture-Specific Items

## I. Introduction

In studying the language of a society of better to say country, it is not a good idea to focus just on the language and the process of communication. Indeed there are other structures that help us better in understanding a country more than language. One of these structures can be regarded as culture. In this way knowing about the culture of a society takes us beyond our purpose. We know that a nation's culture flourishes by interacting with other cultures. Cultural variety opens our eyes to human rights, but cultural variety can only be recognized through discussions. Generally, Language is an expression of culture and individuality of its speakers. It influences the way the speakers perceive the world. So focusing on the issue of translation from one language to another, the culture of both languages in the process of translation is influential. Of course one should consider that to what extent the culture is in the text and to what extent the language is in culture.

As a matter of fact, a good translator should be familiar with the culture, customs, and social settings of the source and target language speakers. He should also be familiar with different styles of speaking, and social norms of both languages. This awareness, can improve the quality of the translations to a great extent. According to Hatim and Mason (1990), the social context in translating a text is probably a more important variable than its genre. The act of translating takes place in the socio-cultural context. Consequently, it is important to judge translating activity only within a social context.

## II. Culture and Language

Wittgenstein once said, " The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (1958, p. 53). Language, as a part of the cultural core, is at the heart of culture. What people do with language – narrative, poetry, songs, plays, etc – are soft expressions of a culture; they are faces of culture. Languages are systems of verbal symbols – vocal and/or written, organized

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by particular rules (grammar) & used by particular rules (grammar) and used by particular communities in order to develop and communicate their thoughts and affections.

### III. Definitions of Translation and Culture

The first definition is presented by Catford (1965, p. 20). He states that translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. In this definition, the most important thing is equivalent textual material. Yet, it is still vague in terms of the type of equivalence. Culture is not taken into account.

Nida and Taber (1969) explain the process of translating as, translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. Translation, involving the transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by one social group into the appropriate expression of another group, entails a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. As cultures are increasingly brought into greater contact with one another, it is the cultural aspect of the text that we should take into account.

As translators we are faced with an alien culture that requires that its message be conveyed in anything but a strange way. SugengHariyanto in "The Implication of Culture on Translation Theory and Practice" states:

Related to translation, culture manifests in two ways. First, the concept or reference of the vocabulary items is somehow specific for the given culture. Second, the concept or reference is actually general but expressed in a way specific to the source language culture. In practice, however, it is suggested that a translator should take into account the purpose of the translation in translating the culturally-bound words or expressions. The translation procedures discussed should also be considered.

The inclusion of cultural perspective in the definition of translation unfortunately does not continue. The later ones keep on not touching this matter. See the following definition:

"Translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structure of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible, but not so closely that the TL structure will be seriously distorted (McGuire, 1980, p. 2).

Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn define culture as:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning elements of future action. (cited in Salehi, 2012)

Misiaczek (2005) reports from Bell (1991):

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Apart from an excellent knowledge of both the source and the target language, which comprises vocabulary and word formation, grammar, spelling and pronunciation, the translator also has to possess so-called sociolinguistic competence, which helps him to understand the text within its context, to determine its functions and predict who is going to receive it. (Paluszliewicz-Misiaczek, 2005, pp. 243-244).

#### **IV. Culture and its Role in Translation**

According to the mentioned definitions regarding culture and its role in translating a language we will discuss about the role the importance of these concept by focusing of the following definition of culture as follow:

Culture is the product of interacting human minds, and hence a science of culture will be a science of the most complex phenomenon on Earth. It will also be a science that must be built on interdisciplinary foundations including genetics, neuroscience, individual development, ecology and evolutionary biology, psychology and anthropology. In other words, a complete explanation of culture, if such a thing is ever possible, is going to comprise a synthesis of all human science. Such a synthesis poses significant conceptual and methodological problems, but also difficulties of another kind for those contributing to this science. Scholars from different disciplines are going to have to be tolerant of one another, open to ideas from other areas of knowledge. (Plotkin, 2001, p.91)

According to this definition, there are two tendencies in culture-studying considerations. On one hand, the scholars try to find out what exactly is being studied and how it is being studied when a particular approach is applied; and what can possibly be the proper field of study for a general science of culture. This means that culture is not an existing object of study that needs scientific analysis.

PeeterTorop (2009) focuses on the relationship between culture and translation as, Culture operates largely through translational activity, since only by the inclusion of new texts into culture can the culture undergo innovation as well as perceive its specificity.

Hanada Al-Masriin an article titled "Translation and Cultural Equivalences" (2009) focuses on cultural translation, especially addressing the issue of cultural inequivalences or losses occurring in the translation of Arabic literary texts. He investigates the translation strategies that led to cultural losses and to emphasize the important role of the translator as a cultural insider. He analyzes figurative language (metaphors, idiomatic expressions, proverbs) in two texts: Arabic (the source text) and English (the target text). He concludes his article with the implication that a translator has to assume the role of a cultural insider for both texts in order to render a culturally more faithful translation

Mohammad Salehi in an article "Reflections on Culture, Language and Translation" (2012), has made an attempt to define the concept of culture from different viewpoints in translation studies and to offer an analysis of researchers' views of the interaction between culture and language and also between culture and translation. He points out that, culture and translation are among the most determining and influential variables in human communication. It is generally believed that culture influences the translational discourse in a number of ways.

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There are many comments on the relationship between language and culture. Although the majority confirms the language and culture as concepts indispensable, some hypotheses insist on the irrelevancy of these two concepts.

## **V. Culture-specific Items (CSI)**

According to Snell-Hornby (1993), addressing the potential problems existing in translation between English and German, there could be five basic groups of prototypes which can be briefly brought about as what follows:

- 1) Terminology / nomenclature
- 2) Internationally known items and sets
- 3) Concrete objects, basic level items
- 4) Word, expressing perception and evaluation often linked to socio-cultural norms
- 5) Culture-bound elements

Moreover, Newmark (1998) is on the belief that a large number of words can be reproduced to designate a special language or terminology of a speech community when that community concentrates on a particular topic. In line with this theory of cultural word, five different classes of "cultural categories" are designated from each other. Those categories are as following:

- 1) Ecology
- 2) Material culture
- 3) Social culture
- 4) Organizations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts
- 5) Gestures and habits

## **VI. Translation of Culture-specific Items (CSI)**

Every society has its own set of habits, value judgements and classification systems which sometimes are quite different and sometimes overlap. Modern literature on translation draws heavily on the important role of cultural gap between SL and TL communities. As Javier Franco Aixela (1996, p. 54) notes, "cultural asymmetry between two linguistic communities is necessarily reflected in the discourses of their members, with the potential opacity and inaccessibility this may involve in the target culture system".

He considers translation as a means which provides the TL society with a variety of strategies, ranging from conservation to naturalization, against the backdrop of the sense of

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otherness which conveys this difference with a set of cultural signs capable of questioning or even denying our own culture.

The choice between these strategies is a function of the degree of receiving society's tolerance and its own solidity. What is especially important in the translation of culture-specific items is the significant loss and gain in their connotations. The very meaning of the original is at stake. Aixela's attempt to clarify the notion of culture-specific items, therefore, leads him to the following definition of them:

" Those textually actualized items whose function and source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a connotation in a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text" (ibid, p. 58).

He then presents several strategies for translating CSIs which serve the function of conversation:

### 1) **Repetition**

The original reference is retained as much as possible through being repeated in the TL (e.g., Los Angeles → لس آنجلس). However, this strategy risks a rise in the exotic character of the CSI and therefore, may promote alienation of the TL readership of the original text. A noteworthy point underlined by this problem is that something absolutely identical might, in effect, be absolutely different in its collective reception.

### 2) **Orthographic adaptation**

This strategy involves transcription and transliteration. It applies to languages that have almost the same alphabetical systems; for instance Latin languages (e.g. in translation from English into Russian, *Kemidov* becomes *Keindov*).

### 3) **Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation**

In many cases, the translator opts for a denotatively close reference to the original, but increases its comprehensibility by coming up with a TL item which can be recognized as belonging to the cultural system of the source text. He does this by capitalizing on pre-established translations within the intertextual corpus of the TL or drawing on linguistic transparency. Units of frequency and currencies provide good examples (foot → پا). This category also covers things because which are foreign to the receiving culture but still comprehensible because analogous or even homogenous to the native ones.

These strategies fall under the category of preservation, but there are several other strategies that serve the function of substitution:

#### a) **Synonymy**

Stylistic preferences inform this strategy, which is aimed at avoiding repetitions of the CSI by applying synonyms or parallel references. It thus keeps recurrence at bay as a stylistic disadvantage.

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**b) Limited Universalization**

When the translator finds a certain CSI to be incomprehensible to the reader, he looks for another possibility and replaces it with a reference that he deems more universal and less specific to the SL culture (e.g. شربت شهادت را نوشيد → was martyred).

**4) Absolute Universalization**

This is basically the same as the previous strategy, but the translator cannot find a better known CSI or decides to drop any alien connotations and come up with a neutral reference in the TL culture (e.g. شربت شهادت را نوشيد → was killed ).

**5) Naturalization**

This strategy brings the CSI into the intertextual corpus understood as specific by the TL culture. It adapts the SL word first to the normal pronunciation, then to the normal morphology of the TL. Literature makes infrequent use of this procedure. (e.g. realism → رنالیسم ).

**6) Deletion**

The translator may deem the CSI ideologically or stylistically unacceptable, or see it being of little relevance, or that it is too obscure or that for any other reason he does not want to use procedures mentioned before. He therefore prefers to drop it in the target text ( e.g. ملت خداجوی ایران → The Iranian nation)

**7) Autonomous Creation**

Like sometimes is the case in translating film or book titles, this rarely used strategy is applied by the translators when they think it would be interesting to their readers to add some nonexistent cultural reference in the source text.

**VII. Translation Strategies for CSIs**

Vinay and Darbelnet in their cultural theory of translation, believe that there could be different translation procedures for rendering a word from SL to TL (Munday, 2001, pp. 56-60):

- 1) Borrowing
- 2) Calque (loan shift)
- 3) Literal Translation
- 4) Transposition (Shift)
- 5) Modulation
- 6) Equivalence

7) Adaptation

In Mona Baker's (1998) theory, seven different procedures could be seen for translation of culture-bound elements which are summarized as translation by:

- 1) A more general word (subordinate)
- 2) A more natural/less expressive word
- 3) Cultural substitution
- 4) Using a loan word or a loan word plus explanation
- 5) Paraphrase using unrelated words
- 6) Omission
- 7) Illustration

In Newmark's (1988) theory there are 17 strategies for translation of culture-specific items:

- 1) Borrowing (Transference): transliteration
- 2) Naturalization: adaptation of SL into TL punctuation and morphology
- 3) Cultural equivalent: a TL approximate cultural word replaces the SL cultural word
- 4) Functional Equivalent: the use of a cultural free word
- 5) Descriptive Equivalent: Expanding the core meaning of SL word via description
- 6) Synonymy: which is appropriate only where literal translation is impossible
- 7) Through translation, calque or loan translation
- 8) Shift/Translation: a translation procedure via a change
- 9) Modulation: translation involving a change of perspective viewpoint and category of thought
- 10) Recognized Translation: use of official or generally accepted translation of any institutional term
- 11) Translation Label: a temporary translation usually of a new institutional term
- 12) Compensation: when loss of meaning, sound-effect, etc. is made up for in another part
- 13) Componential analysis: expanding a lexical unit into basic components of one to two or three translations
- 14) Reduction and Expansion: narrowing down the meaning of a phrase into fewer words or vice versa

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15) Paraphrase: expansion via amplification or explanation of meaning of a segment of the text

16) Couplets: combining two or more of the above-mentioned procedure when dealing with a single problem.

17) Note, additions, Glosses: adding cultural, technical, or linguistic information of the mentioned translation strategies for rendering CSIs.

Newmark (1988) believes Transference and Componential analysis to be two opposing methods for translation of cultural words. According to him, transference gives "local color", keeping cultural names and concepts. However, this method may cause problems for the general readership and limits the compensation of certain aspects. He also claims that the strategy of "componential analysis" is the most accurate translation procedure which excludes the culture and highlights the message ( Newmark, 1988, pp, 81-103).

Pederson (2005), the Swedish translation scholar, in his article entitled " How is culture rendered in subtitles?", investigates the translation problem which may be caused by what defines as " *an Extralinguistic Culture-bound Reference (ECR)*". He defines Extralinguistic Culture-bound Reference as follows:

ECR is defined as reference that is attempted by means of any culture-boundlinguistic expression, which refers to an extralinguistic entity or process, and which is assumed to have a discourse referent that is identifiable to a relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopedic knowledge of this audience. His model aims for a "middle-of-the-road point of view, in which some things are intralinguistic and some are not. The study of intralinguistic culture-bound references, such as idioms, proverbs, slang and dialects are not included in Pederson's model even though it is possible to modify for the study of those as well (Pederson, 2005, p. 2).

Pederson's (2005) proposed model, which contains all the strategies available to a subtitler, is based on data from investigation of one hundred Anglophone films and TV-programs and their Scandinavian subtitles (Pederson, 2005, p. 2). In his model, the strategies for rendering ECRs into a target language are arranged on a Venutian Scale, ranging from the most foreignizing to the most domesticating strategies. The strategies for rendering ECRs into a target language are listed as Retention, Specification, Direct Translation, Generalization, Substitution, Omission, and the use of an Official Equivalent.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

As frequently emphasized by different translation scholars, the issue of culture and its complex relationship with language in terms of culture-specific items are among the most thorny issues that a translator or interpreter may face. Accordingly, the issue will be also important to those people who are going to teach and/or evaluate how to translate different texts or pieces of speech from language into another.

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