

Reflections on Culture, Language and Translation

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Abstract

The present study 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. In interactional studies, researchers try to investigate the effects of variables on each other. 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. An overview of the different views on the interaction between culture and language is also offered. Implications of each view for translation studies are also discussed in detail.

Key Words: Culture, Language, Translation, Interactional studies

I. Introduction

Throughout history, language has proved to be the best tool with which human beings could express most of their feelings, needs, experiences and attitudes, and at the same time, entrain the knowledge and traditions of the time to remain available not only for the next generations of the same speaking community, but for other nations and ethnicities as well. The problem, however, is that not all people share the same language and culture. At this point the indispensable intervention of translation and translators is felt.

Cultural referents existing in every society determine how individuals go about the process of comprehending and interpreting written/spoken texts. In other words, texts are not written or spoken in a vacuum but are the manifestation of the sociocultural norms of a particular society within which the people of the society interpret their own behaviors and those of others. The culture specificity of texts means that texts cannot be directly translated from a SL to a TL and this fact poses a problem to translators when they encounter cultural items in the text they are to translate. Of particular interest to researchers is the translation of literary texts which are usually replete with cultural items. Therefore, it goes without saying that literary-text translators should be familiar with both the source and the target cultures. Further they should exploit the most effective strategies at their disposal so that- as Nida believes- the translation of cultural items from the SL into the TL has the same effect on the TL readers as it does on the SL readers (As cited in Munday, 2001, p. 42).

II. On Defining Culture

One of the oldest and most quoted definitions of culture was formulated by the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871. "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (As quoted in Katan 1999, p. 16).

By 1952, two American anthropologists Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1961, p. 181) had compiled a list of 164 definitions. Their lengthy (165th) contribution was as follows:

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. (As quoted in Katan, 1999, p. 16)

There are different views about the concept of culture and as a result its definition. Trompenaars (1993, p. 22) admits that "In fifteen years I have seldom encountered two or more groups or individuals with identical suggestions regarding the concept of culture"(As quoted in Katan, 1999, p. 16).

Vermeer believes that "culture consists of everything one needs to know, master and feel, in order to assess where members of a society are behaving acceptably or deviantly in their various roles" (As quoted in Katan, 2009, p. 82).

Katan (2009, p. 74) claims that as long as time passes and new fields of studies come to an existence the concept of culture changes in human's mind.

Originally, culture was simple. It referred exclusively to the humanist ideal of what was civilized in developed society (the education system, the arts, architecture). Then a second meaning, the way of life of a people, took place alongside. Emphasis at the time was very much on 'primitive' cultures and tribal practices. With the development of sociology and cultural studies, a third meaning has emerged, related to forces in society or ideology.

Life and the style of living is one of the key points in defining the concept of culture. Newmark's definition of culture is as follows:

"The way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (1988, p. 94)

Agar too in defining culture relates it to real life:

Culture is ...what happens to you when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared. Culture is an awareness, a consciousness, one that reveals the hidden self and opens path, to other ways of being. (Agar, 1994, p. 20)

Although it is said that there is no two definitions of culture that are identical, all definitions have got elements that are repeated similarly in them. For example, elements of belief and value, even if not stated explicitly, have been implied in majority of them.

Larson (1984, p. 430) defines culture as "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share".

Hester and Eglin have somehow a different view. They believe that culture is in action and declare:

Not just that members use culture to do things, but that culture is constituted in and only exists in, action. For membership categorization analysis, this means that the orderliness of cultural resources (categories, devices and the rest) is constituted in their use rather than preexisting. (Hester and Eglin, 1997, p. 20)

Finally, according to the *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, Asher (1994, p. 2001) confirms that "Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature" (As quoted in Katan 1999, p. 17).

However, defining culture is important not as an academic exercise, but because the definition delimits how culture is perceived and taught. As Katan (1999, p. 17) claims and quotes from CED 1991, in defining the concept of culture all words should deliberately be chosen. He states that "if we define culture in terms of 'the artistic and social pursuits, expressions and tastes valued by a society or class we will be teaching national literature, sports and hobbies".

III. Language and Culture

"The heavy stress on language as an aspect of cultural identity", as Lambert (2000, p. 166) says, "is of course not new at all. It is even rather common in historical and cultural research, in anthropology, history, pragmatics, literary studies, etc". Lambert adds that "more important are the fluctuations, contradictions, and hesitations in the treatment of the basic question, 'Has culture anything to do with language?', or: 'Is language a distinctive feature in matters of cultural identity?'" (p. 166). He believes that rather than answering by a simple 'yes' or 'no', it is better to examine where and when the answer tends to become 'yes' or 'no', and what the backgrounds are for such answers, and the consequences for the treatment of cultural matters, especially in the 'age of mobility'.

In Katan's (1999) opinion, Malinowski was one of the first anthropologists to realize that language could only be understood with reference to culture. In 1923 he coined the term 'context of situation' and noted that a language could only be fully understood, i.e.

have meaning, when this two contexts (situation and culture) were implicitly or explicitly clear to the interlocutors and hearers (Katan 1999, p. 72).

Boas (1986) broached the subject of culture and discussed the links between language, thought and the native environment. Boas felt that language was not in itself a barrier to thought but that there was a dynamic relationship between language, culture and thought. His key point was succinctly put as follows: "the form of the language will be moulded by the state of that culture".

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.

Malinowski (1938, p. 305) extremely claims that "language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture... it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterances" (As quoted in Katan 1999, p. 72).

Bennet (1998, p. 3) has somehow the same view. He explains that the "fundamental premise of 'the intercultural communication approach' is that 'cultures are different in their languages, behavior patterns', and values". So as Munday infer of this statement "an attempt to use [monocultural] self as a predictor of shared assumptions and responses to messages is unlikely to work' – because the response, in our case to a translation, will be ethnocentric" (Munday, 2009, p. 74).

O'Connor and Seymour (1990, p. 131) report that more recently, NLP has also taken the view that meaning in communication is culture-bound: "We learn what things mean from our culture and individual upbringing" (As quoted in Katan 1999, p. 73).

Hongwei (1999) believes in language as a portrait of culture. He says that "language mirrors other parts of culture, supports them, spreads them and helps to develop others" (p.121). This special feature of language distinguishes it from all other facets of culture and makes it crucially important for the transfer of culture. It is no exaggeration to say that, as Hongwei believes too, "language is the life-blood of culture and that culture is the track along which language forms and develops" (p. 121). The formation and development of all aspects of a culture are closely related to one another, and language is no exception. A careful study of the meanings of words and how these change demonstrate how material culture, institutional culture and mental culture influence the formation and development of language (Hongwei, 1999, p. 123).

Two of the most vigorous exponents of the role of culture in language were, of course, Sapir and his pupil Benjamin Lee Whorf. It is a testimony to their ground-breaking and controversial ideas that they are still discussed today. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has an obligatory place in all contemporary text books that touch upon the subject, even though the hypothesis was put on paper before the 1939 (As cited in Katan, 1999, p. 74).

Sapir (1929, p. 214), like Malinowski, was convinced that language could only be interpreted within a culture. However, he went further, suggesting that "no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same reality. The worlds

in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels"(As quoted in Katan, 1999). This well-known extract constitutes part of what is known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, of which there have traditionally been two versions:the strong and the weak.

In the strong view, language actually determines the way the language user thinks, which would suggest, for example, that bilinguals would automatically change their view of the world as they change language. This has few supporters today. Katan (1999, p. 74) believes that:

If the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis were accepted, this would mean that people, hence translators and interpreters too, would be 'prisoners' of their native language and would be incapable of conceptualizing in categories other than those of our native tongue. It is now widely recognized that such a view is untenable.

Sapir introduces his essay on 'Language Race and Culture' (1949, p. 207) with these words:"Language has a setting ... language does not exist apart from culture" (As quoted in Katan, 1999, p. 73). On the contrary, Newmark (1988, p. 95) does not regard language as a component or feature of culture. He believes that "if it were so, translation would be impossible".

Based on the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf theory, it is suggested that language has a tendency to influence thought. This version of the theory has many more supporters in anthropology, linguistics and translation. Supporters of the weak version suggest that language is one of the factors influencing our understanding of reality, but it is not the determining factor. According to the Logical Level model, the determining factors are, as Reddick (1992) suggests, beliefs and values (As cited in Katan, 1999, p. 74).

Lambert (2000) believes that Cultural Studies, from its beginning, has isolated itself from linguistics and/or the study of language. As an example he refers to literary environment where Cultural Studies has originated but the question of language was not the real issue. He continues that except in branches such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics or discourse analysis, the link between language and identity was not at all a central issue for linguists either, which has put it into kind of a no-man's land. Lambert directs his criticism to literary scholars and academic institutions which have structured their organization of departments and curricula on the basis of national literature but the role played by the (national) language has been hardly questioned:"it is taken for granted that national literatures have their national language, once and for all" (p. 166).

In social psychology and communication studies too, as Lambert (Lambert, 2000, p. 166) reports, the language components is hardly taken into consideration when cultural awareness has become quite central. Communication studies or even economics overlook language and the verbal component as a rather peripheral difficulty when dealing with globalization.

The most striking observation is that the discipline completely in the service of language, i.e. linguistics, has paid little attention to the question of culture and identity and

has not even discovered to what extent language might be constitutive of society (Lambert, 2000, p. 166). Lambert states that just a few areas in linguistics such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis or pragmatics have broken the spell, p. "their degree of expertise is very high, and their contribution to our knowledge of culture is fundamental" (Lambert, 2000, p. 166). In his belief the difficulty is that "their insights are not really recognized within the core of the discipline" (Lambert, 2000, p. 166).

As his last criticism, Lambert (Lambert, 2000, p. 166) states that although many links between culture and language may be approached in any area of the humanities (including law, economics, experimental psychology), there is no institutionalized nor even widely accepted space for it, and that those who actually take it seriously are very eclectic in reading publications from the other disciplines.

As the last point in this part reviewing Kramersch's belief on the relationship between language and culture is worthwhile. She believes that:

Language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language: they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus we can say that language symbolizes cultural reality (Kramersch, 1998, p. 3).

IV. Translation and Culture

Anyone who has ever attempted to translate a text knows that knowledge of the languages alone does not guarantee success. Peter Newmark (1995, p. 79) notes sharply but aptly that: "any old fool can learn a language [...] but it takes an intelligent person to become a translator". Paluszliwicz-Misiaczek (2005) reports Bell (1991) that:

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 socio-linguistic competence, which helps him to understand the text within its context, to determine its functions and predict who is going to receive it (Paluszliwicz-Misiaczek, 2005, p. 243-244).

Venuti (1995) defines the act of translation as "a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation"(p.17). Then he describes the aim of translation as something that is indispensable of cultural consideration. In Venuti's view the aim of translation is:

To bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an

appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, and political. (Venuti 1995, p. 18)

In Venuti's view, the viability of a translation is established by its relationship to the cultural and social conditions under which the translation is produced and read. So far what is clearly common in the majority of translation scholar is being not ignored of the cultural consideration in translation process. According to Nida and Taber, cultural translation is "a translation in which the content of the message is changed to conform to the receptor culture in some way, and/or in which information is introduced which is not linguistically implicit in the original" (Nida and Taber, 1982, p. 199).

Regarding the close relationship between translation and culture "Snell-Hornby (1988,p. 41) has pointed out, the translatability of a text depends on the extent to which the text is 'embedded in its own specific culture' and also on how far apart, with regard to time and place, the ST and TT receivers are" (As quoted in Leppihalme, 1997, p. 4).

Leppihalme (1997) believes that:

Much of the work that is currently being done in translation studies foregrounds social and cultural aspects of translation, with the emphasis on texts in their 'macro-context' (Snell-Hornby, 1991, p. 15): instead of simply pondering the translatability of source text, there is concern with functioning of the target text in the target language and cultural context (p. 2).

Toury (2000) states that "translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions, i.e., at least two sets of norm-systems on each level" (p. 207). Also Armstrong (2005, p. 3) is among those who believed that just a bilingual and bicultural translator is able to carry out a complete translation.

As it was mentioned above translation and culture move in the same path in parallel to each other. House's statement about translation confirms these findings. She remarks that:

Translation is not only a linguistic act, it is also a cultural one, an act of communication across cultures. Translation always involves both language and culture simply because the two cannot really be separated. Language is culturally embedded: it both expresses and shapes cultural reality, and the meanings of linguistic items, be they words or larger segments of text, can only be understood when considered together with the cultural context in which these linguistic items are used (2009, p. 11).

She then sum up with this statement that "in the process of translation, therefore, not only the two languages but also the two cultures come into contact. In this sense, translating is a form of intercultural communication" (House, 2009, p. 12).

Munday (2001, p. 127) reports that "Bassnett and lefevere go beyond language and focus on the interaction between translation and culture, on the way which culture impacts and constrains translation and on 'the larger issues of context, history and convention'". He adds that "the move from translation as text to translation as culture and politics is what Mary Snell-Hornby terms 'the cultural turn'(p. 127). Venuti (1995, p. 305) notes that:

Translation is a process that involves looking for similarities between language and culture – particularly similar messages and formal techniques – but it does this because it is constantly confronting dissimilarities. It can never and should never aim to remove these dissimilarities entirely. A translated text should be the site at which a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other and resistency (As quoted in Rubel & Rosman, 2003, p. 11).

As the final statement on the relationship between translation and culture, Leppihalme (1997) states that:

Culturally oriented translation studies, then, do not see the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) simply as samples of linguistic material. The texts occur in a given situation in a given culture in the world, and each has a specific function and an audience of its own. Instead of studying specimens of language under laboratory conditions as it were, the more translation scholar – and the translator – thus approaches a text as if from a helicopter: seeing first the cultural context, then the situational context, and finally the text itself (Leppihalme, 1997, p. 3).

V. Conclusion

As Kramersch (1998) states language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus, we can say that language symbolizes cultural reality.

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