CULTURAL FACTORS AND TRANSLATION

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The less cultural a text, the clearer the translation
Peter Newmark

In this paper I address the issue of the influence of cultural factors on translation I deal with the relationship of language and culture, focusing on difficulties in translating culture bound idiomatic expressions.

There are in all languages idioms and colloquial expressions used in a non literal sense, to translate them properly we need to reach a deep knowledge and understanding of both cultures, the source and the receptor language culture, as they may not share the same cultural values.

For Newmark[1] idioms are «phrases or word-groups whose meaning cannot be elicited from the separate meanings of each word of which they are formed».

Since idioms can appear in formal style or in slang, a TL equivalent with the same degree of informality is difficult to find. If we have a look at the English idiom, «what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander» (literally in Spanish, *«lo que es salsa para la gansa, es salsa para el ganso»* o *«todos moros o todos cristianos»*), in both cases the idea conveyed through an appropriate equivalence is the same: no discrimination, equal opportunities for everyone.

According to Vinay and Darbelnet,[2] in cases like that, through a process of equivalence, the translator substitutes a source language text by a target language text, rendering the same situation, even though both texts are semantically and formally different.

The culture concept has been defined from different viewpoints. From a traditional point of view, Harris[3] states that «the culture concept comes down to behaviour patterns associated with particular groups of people, that is to customs or to a people's way of life.»

From a cognitive perspective, Spradley[4] defines it as «the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour».

For Shaw[5] culture can be considered as «a system of communicative knowledge that we must reach in order to communicate meaningfully». Through translation, the

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[1]P. Newmark: *Approaches to Translation*, London, Pergamon, 1981.

[2]J. P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet: *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, Paris, Didier, 1973.

[3]Marvin Harris: *The Rise of Antropological Theory,* New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968.

[4]James P. Spradley: *Participant Observation,* New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winton, 1980.

[5]R. Daniel Shaw: «The Translation Context: Cultural Factors in Translation», *Translation Review* (1987), 23, pp. 25-29.

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thoughts and ideas expressed in one context are presented in a different context where they take shape in a linguistic and cultural system other than that in which they were formed.

Seelye declares that the conventional way human beings meet certain basic physical and psychological needs helps us to understand their culture:

> People everywhere are impelled to satisfy certain basic needs such as for food and shelter, for love and affection, and for self-pride. Man has banded together to meet these needs. Predictably different bands of people have developed different ways of doing so.[6]

From our view, however, cultural events of any importance also imply affective states of mind. The way emotion is expressed on occasions is to some extent conventionalised and may differ among different language groups.

Iranians, for example, have a social convention known as *tarof*, it consists of being as polite as possible. In conversations, they may say phrases that border on the poetic, having no sense if we translate them literally into the receptor language. To excuse oneself when leaving a party, one might say: «A flower has no back», *literally «una flor no tiene espalda»*, meaning *«lamento muchísimo tener que marcharme»*.

It is not only a question of understanding the affective characteristics of a cultural event, we must come to terms internally with the values and emotions expressed in the new culture to be able to translate appropriately.

As Sapir[7] asserts,

> No two languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Sapir's thesis, supported later by Whorf,[8] is connected with the more recent view of the semiotician Lotman[9] that «language is a modelling system». Lotman describes literature and art in general as «secondary modelling systems», derived from the primary modelling system of language, and declares that:

> No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language.

Hatim and Mason's theory on translation[10] is focused on the decisive relevance of cultural context: «Translating is a communicative process which takes place within a social context». They consider translators as mediators:

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[6]H. N. Seelye: *Teaching Culture*, Lincolnwood, III, National Texbook Company, 1984, p. 28.

[7]E. Sapir: Culture, *Language and Personality*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, Univ. of California, 1956.

[8]B. Whorf: «Language, Thoughts and Reality», en *Selected Writings*, ed. J. B. Carroll, MIT, 1956.

[9]J. Lotman and B. Upensky: «On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture», *New Literary History* (1978), IX, 2.

[10]B. Hatim and I. Mason: *Discourse and the Translator*, London, Longman, 1990.

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> Translators mediate between cultures (including ideologies, moral systems and socio-political structures), seeking to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning. What has value as a sign in one cultural community may be devoid of significance in another [...].

Hatim and Mason consider translation as a communication process which goes through linguistic and cultural barriers. According to them, the translator may face problems within or outside the language concept.

The relevance of culture teaching is nowadays enhanced in language pedagogy, Stern[11] stresses the fact that «language and culture are intertwined, that it is not possible to teach a language without culture, and that culture is the necessary context for language use.» Until the 1960s, language was studied mainly in terms of its formal features. Since the late 1960s, language has begun to be considered increasingly in social, pragmatic, and semantic terms.

Hammerly,[12] stressing the importance of aspects of culture beyond language, suggests the following goals of culture for second language learners:

1. Knowledge of the cultural connotations of words and phrases.
2. Knowledge of how to behave in common situations.
3. The development of interest and understanding toward the second culture.
4. Understanding of crosscultural differences.
5. Research-like projects.
6. Development of an integrated view of the second culture.
7. Development of empathy toward a second culture and its people.

On numerous occasions, the lack of cultural knowledge may make translation difficult. The importance of the knowledge of both cultures, the source and the target language, is sometimes underestimated both by the inexperienced translator as well as by society in general.

The contact with the second language daily life, its customs and traditions is a must for a translator in order to avoid important misunderstandings, when encountered to sentences like, «our porter kicked the bucket last week», translated literally into Spanish it would mean, *«nuestro portero/a le dio una patada al cubo la semana pasada»*, when it should be translated into *«nuestro portero estiró la pata la semana pasada»*.

Customs and traditions play a prominent role in language as well as in culture, the English idiom «to draw a real herring across the track» (literally in Spanish *«arrastrar un arenque por el suelo»*), *«dar una pista falsa»*, comes from the custom of fugitives who used to drag a herring along their way in order to throw the dogs off the scent.

History is present in many idioms: In Robin Hood's times, hunting in royal forests was punished with death: «One might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb», (literally in Spanish, *«lo mismo da que lo maten a uno por una oveja que por un cordero»*), *«de perdidos al río»*. The Normans used to torture the English to collect

[11]H. H. Stern: *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*, Oxford, OUP, 1992.

[12]H. Hammerly: *Synthesis in Second Language Teaching*, Blaine-Washington, Second Language, 1982.

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money from them: «To haul somebody over the coals», (literally, *«tirar a uno sobre los carbones»*), *«dar a uno un buen rapapolvos»*.

The American indians used to put a feather in their hair for every white man they killed: «A feather in one's cap» (literally, *«una pluma en el gorro»*), *«apuntarse un buen tanto»*.

Coming from the English hunting tradition: «To beat about the bush», (literally, *«golpear por la maleza»*), meaning to beat the bush to make the pray run out, *«andarse por las ramas»*; «to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds» (literally, *«correr con la liebre y cazar con los galgos»*), *«estar en misa y repicando»*.

Coming from the maritime tradition, so deeply rooted along the years in the British culture, we have: «To take the wind out of somebody's sails (literally, *«quitar el viento de las velas a alguien»*), *«dejar cortado»*; we also find, «all hands to the pump (on deck)» (literally, *«todas las manos a cubierta»*), *«todos a arrimar el hombro»*.

From the literature tradition, from Shakespeare «to out-Herod Herod» (lit., *«superar en crueldad a Herodes»*), *«ser más papista que el Papa»*; «All Greek to me» (lit., *«todo griego para mí»*), *«no entiendo ni jota»*.

From popular wisdom, «It's no use crying over spilt milk» (lit. *«No vale la pena llorar por la leche derramada»*), *«agua pasada no mueve molino»*. Some of the proverbs come to us deformed by usage, and sometimes only the first part can be recognised, as in «the last straw (on the camel's back)» (lit. *«la última paja en la espalda del camello»*), *«la última gota (de agua que hace rebosar el vaso)»*.

The French/English rivalry can be observed by the way both countries attribute their own faults to each other, «to take a French leave» (literally, *«tomar licencia francesa»*), *«despedirse a la francesa»* or in French, *«filer à l'anglaise»*.

Nowadays, expressions like «Full House», can only be translated if we have some understanding of determining cultural factors that native speakers have, they know that the real meaning in Spanish is not *«casa completa»*, but *«localidades agotadas»*.

It is used in cinemas or theatres when there are no tickets left.

«That's too bad» (literally in Spanish, *«eso es demasiado malo»*), *«¡qué lastima!»*, *«¡qué mala suerte!»*, expressing regret.

«Good for you!» (literally, *«bueno para ti»*), *«¡me alegro por ti!»*, used to congratulate people.

«Free house» (literally, *«casa libre»*), it means that the choice of beer is not limited by a single brand in British pubs.

«Take care!», (literally, *«ten cuidado»*), replaces «so long!, «goodbye!», «you should take more care of yourself», used in farewells. In Spanish, *«¡cuídate!»*.

«Two/Four Star», used in Gas Stations to designate different qualities and kinds of petrol: *«gasolina extra, super»*.

«Merging traffic», (literally in Spanish, *«tráfico convergente»*), it refers to a traffic sign that means *«cruce»*.

«Hold on», used on the telephone instead of «wait» because it's a social convention.

«Mind the door» (British)/Watch the door (American), means that you have to be very careful because the door is low.

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The American expression «Please, bus your tray», used in notices in some American restaurants, in Spanish *«por favor, retire la bandeja»*, clear away dishes.

Obviously, translation involves far more than replacement of lexical and grammatical items between languages, as can be seen in the translation of idioms and colloquial expressions.

The translator does not translate isolated words, but words used in context, words that are socioculturally conditioned.

Newmark points out that «one translates ideas, on which the words act as constraints. If ever one is permitted to translate words, not ideas, it is when the reference in non-literary translation or the sense in literary translation is still obscure after all aids have been consulted in vain».

In trying to solve the problem of translation equivalence, Neubert,[13] claims that «from the point of view of a theory of texts, translation equivalence must be considered a semiotic category, comprising a syntactic, semantic and pragmatic component. These components are arranged in a hierarchical relationship, where semantic equivalence takes priority over syntactic equivalence, and pragmatic equivalence conditions and modifies both the other elements.»

Bassnett-McGuire[14] states that, «in order to achieve expressive identity between the source language (SL) and the receptor language (TL) texts, the process may involve discarding the basic linguistic elements of the source language text. Once the translator moves away from close linguistic equivalence, the problems of determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence aimed for begin to emerge.»

In her view, «equivalence in translation should not be approached as a search for sameness, since sameness cannot even exist between two TL versions of the same text, let alone between the SL and the TL version.»

Translators must know about the cultural context from which the communication emerges and into which they seek to relate the intended message, in order to mediate appropriately the author's intended meaning.

Hall,[15] tells the story of a translator of one of Harold Pinter's plays, who having difficulties in translating the line, «Who watered the wicket at Melbourne?», he looked up the word «wicket» in the dictionary and chose «church gate» among the meanings given. The line was translated incorrectly as, *«¿Quién regó la puerta de la iglesia en Melbourne?»*. Due to the translator's lack of familiarity with one of England's national games, cricket, the line lost completely its effect and suitability. Melbourne is known as the site of a famous cricket ground. The wicket is the central grass strip on which the most important action takes place in cricket matches. To water the wicket would be an unfair and illegal practice.

Translating clearly means more than understanding the SL text grammar or vocabulary. In our view, what marks out a good translator, is not his/her command of the tech-

[13]A. Neubert: *Text and Translation*, Leipzig, Enzyklopadie, 1985.

[14]S. Bassnett-McGuire: *Translation Studies*, Routledge, 1980.

[15]N. Hall: «Literacy as Social Experience», in *Teaching English to Children*, London, Collins, 1991.

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nical features of the language, but his/her ability to contextualise the language within the cultural norms and expectations of the target language users.

Duff[16] points out that «there are questions that cannot be solved merely by translating the surface meaning, that is those features of language like tone, innuendo, implication, hidden reference, irony, metaphor, imagery, etc. which need to be not only translated but also interpreted».

He offers the following example taken from a play:

> The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch.

In this case, Duff underlines that «a faithful translation of the words might be an unfaithful interpretation of the meaning». The translator may not find in the dictionary that the phrase «*slim volumes*» is ironic, means «refined tasks» associated with a certain class of people.

As we have stated at the beginning of this paper, and as we have seen through the examples given, it seems obvious that the most effective translation takes place when there is the least cultural distance between the source and the target text. In order to bridge the gap between different culture bound texts, a cultural background and a direct experience of both the source and target language, is necessary for the translator, as the use of formal and informal codes and the cultural knowledge assumed and referred to, may be quite different.

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[16]A. Duff: *Translation*, Oxford, OUP, 1989.

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