TRANSLATION OF CULTURAL TERMS: POSSIBLE OR IMPOSSIBLE?

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Abstract

This paper aims at answering the very question of the possibility or impossibility of the translation of culture, by presenting some of the most popular theories related to the culture-bound terms and their equivalents. Translation and culture are so interrelated that translators can no longer ignore cultural elements in a text. That is why, before analysing some translation theories related to cultural studies, it is very important to establish what culture is and what the problems raised by its passage into a different community are. Every language has its own way to perceive reality, which influences the way in which reality is expressed by the members of a community. When translating, people find out things about others, about a world which is not theirs. If translation did not exist, it would be difficult to communicate with people from other countries, by communication meaning not only the transmission of words and phrases but also the sense of a text, because what translators should translate is messages, senses, and texts. Different translation scholars offer various ways in which translation problems could be solved so that the receiving audience may perceive the culture and the otherness of another world. Finally, to a certain degree and losing a part of the otherness of the source culture, culture can be translated by using some translation methods like the so-called equivalence, according to the functionalist theories.

Keywords: Informational transfer; Translation of culture; Cultural turn; Culture-bound terms; Equivalence; World knowledge.

1 Defining culture and culture-bound terms

Translation is seen nowadays as an important human action and the translator as a mediator between cultures. That is why many scholars have asked how or if culture can be eventually translated into another language. Translation is always placed at the core of the intercultural aspects, so that the study of the translation goes along with the cultural studies. Consequently, cultural aspects of translation have emerged into a series of theories about cultural translation, about its very existence in terms of cultural identity of a specific community. From the beginning, we may ask what culture is. This is not an easy question to answer. In Duranti’s opinion, culture is “something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication” (Duranti 1997:24, cited in Thanasoulas
2001). From this definition, we can observe that language plays a very important role in a culture. Pierre Bourdieu has emphasized the importance of language as a system determined by socio-political processes. In his opinion, language exists as a linguistic habitus (1990:52), which implies not only a particular system of words and grammatical rules, but also a symbolic power of a particular way of communication, with specific patterns for every community (particular systems of classifications, specialized lexicons, metaphors, reference forms, etc.). To speak means to choose a particular way of viewing the world, a particular way of establishing contacts. According to Bourdieu, in a wider sense, we are members of a community of ideas and practices through the language we speak. Therefore, language is linked to culture, as a link between thought and behaviour. Duranti observes that

words carry in them a myriad possibilities for connecting us to other human beings, other situations, events, acts, beliefs, feelings… The indexicality of language is thus part of the constitution of any act of speaking as an act of participation in a community of language users. (Duranti 1997:46)

According to Goodenough (1981:62, cited in Thanasoulas 2001), culture is:

- The ways in which people have organized their experience of the real world so as to give it structure as a phenomenal world of forms, their precepts and concepts.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their phenomenal world so as to give it structure as a system of cause and effect relationships, that is, the propositions and beliefs by which they explain events and accomplish their purposes.
- The ways in which people have organized their experiences so as to structure their world in hierarchies of preferences, namely, their value or sentiment systems.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their past efforts to accomplish recurring purposes into operational procedures for accomplishing these purposes in the future, that is, a set of “grammatical” principles of action and a series of recipes for accomplishing particular ends.

Moreover, for Goodenough (1963:258-259, cited in Thanasoulas 2001) culture “consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about it”. Another translation scholar, Peter Newmark, defines culture as “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression” (1988:94). Consequently, each community has its own particular cultural patterns. The translator’s role becomes clearly a transcultural mediator between communities. Newmark sustains (1988:95) that language is not a component of culture, whereas Hans Vermeer remarks (2000:222) that language is part of a culture. In these terms, Newmark says that, in Vermeer’s opinion, it would be impossible to translate cultural elements.
2 Cultural translation. From theory to practice

Cultural knowledge and differences have represented a major focus of translation scholars. For a very long time, translation has been associated only with language. If we think of traditional definitions of translation, such as the one offered by Catford (1965:20), for whom translation consists in the replacement of textual material in one language by the equivalent textual material in another language. There is Nida and Taber’s definition (1969), according to which “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”. We can observe that meaning has started to be taken into account, representing the first aspect to be taken into consideration when translating. The problem of equivalence becomes a central focus for theorists. In 1976, Brislin defines translation as

the general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization or whether one or both languages is based on signs, as with sign languages of the deaf. (1976:1)

The same author offers a guide for translation of cultural issues, speaking of 'backtranslation', a technique which implies the independent translation of the translated text back into the original language. Then, the original text is compared to the retranslated version, and, if necessary, the translation is reviewed. But this method seems to be too sophisticated and time consuming (Bennett 1998). There are many words for which there is no equivalent, especially when taken out of the context. Van de Vijver & Leung (1977) have remarked that translations obtained through Brislin’s method are most of the time stilted. Another method offered by Werner and Campbell in 1970, more complex than the translation-backtranslation one consists in decentring the documents to be used. The original text and the translation are altered together in order to improve the quality of both the source and target texts.

The definitions appearing in the 1960s-1970s cover in general the same guidelines. First, there is a change of expression from one language to another one. Second, most of the theorists are for the primacy of rendering the message and its meaning in the target culture. Third, the translator is obliged to find the closest equivalent in the target language. If we think of Cicero’s words, in De optimo genere oratorum, who makes the firsts remarks on translation, he distinguishes two ways of translating: ut interpretes (in other words, literal translation) and ut orator, a kind of translation that he prefers, being a form of creation. In this context, Torre (cited in Clouet & Sánchez Hernández 2003-2004:67) associates the translator to a writer.

In an era of speed and informational vacuum, people want to get as quickly as possible to data inaccessible in their mother tongue. The task of the translator
becomes obvious in terms of social cohesion. As Şt. A. Doinaş posits, the cultural space of a language is a virtual one. For languages having the same origin, it is impossible to assert that there are literary forms that cannot be rendered into another language (1974:259). T. Vianu (cited in Kohn 1983:106) says that a good translation stands for the product of delicate equilibrium between what is national and what is foreigner, between the ways in which both source and target languages express themselves.

Micaela Muñoz-Calvo, from the University of Zaragoza, Spain, affirms that translators need “cultural literacy, communicative language competences and cross-cultural competencies as well” (2010:2-3), because they must interpret “socio-cultural meaning in cross-cultural encounters, contributing to the transfer of knowledge across cultures and to cultural development as well” (ibidem). Obviously, the so-called 'Holy Grail' (Santoyo 2010:14) of translation is the creation of an equivalent text. That is why the concept of equivalence in terms of translating culture, i.e. what differentiates and identifies us, becomes a crucial problem.

There are thousands of 'culture-bound' terms, deeply rooted in culture, which the translator has to deal with. In 1958, Vinay and Darbelnet give some examples of areas of culture such as time division, jobs, positions and professions, food, drink, baking, particular aspects of social life, etc. In 1964, Catford talks about measurements, coins, institutions, clothing, etc. All these terms differentiate a community from another and are difficult to translate. Santoyo adds certain sports, dances, musical and artistic terms, “specific areas of activity which correspond in the end to actions which are unique to a person or social group, subject to very specific place and time” (2010:15). That is why there have been many voices which claimed either for the possibility or for the impossibility of translation. Claims on either side have always existed. The myth of the Tower of Babel has been interpreted as either the beginning of translation or as a warning that translation is doomed to failure, according to the radical positions of the Church that the Word of God should be read only in the original.

In Sapir and Whorf’s vision (1956), each language has its own way of structuring reality, hence the impossibility of translation. The main arguments against the possibility of translation are the linguistic ones. For instance, we may analyse (cf. Dimitriu 2002:19) the way in which the chromatic scale is expressed in different languages. The majority of idioms use only five to seven different terms for colours. But in Hebrew, there is no differentiated term for blue, whereas red, white and black are dissociated. Instead, there is only one term for yellow and green. A Rhodesian language named Shona contains only four colours. A Liberian idiom (Boosa) has names for two. How should a person translate for these communities realities which they cannot perceive? Another argument for the impossibility of translation is the lack of symmetry between languages. For example, the Eskimo language has 30 words for snow, Argentina has 200 names for horse-skins and the Arabic language comprises many synonyms for camel. Dimitriu (ibidem) presents some of the 'untranslatable terms', which relates to
geographic, historic and socio-cultural experience: *gentleman*, *understatement* (English), *charme*, *esprit* (French), *dor*, *taină*, *spațiu mitotic* (Romanian). Such instances determined Friederich Schleiermacher to say that there is not a single word in one language to have an exact correspondent in another language. Scholars such as R. Jakobson (1959), B. Croce (1972) sustained the impossibility of translation by the very existence of poetry, full of connotations and stylistic devices, which cannot be translated.

In an article appeared as a reaction to the difficult translation of a Turkish book, *Ruhmana*, written by Saparmourat Turkmenbashi, into French, Mümtaz Kaya (2007:585) talks about the intracultural obstacle, inherent in a writer’s work. He gives the example of Murathan Mungan, a very well known contemporary Turkish writer who explains his difficulty when writing *Parampar Cinleri*. In this book, he wanted to use the word *stool* when describing the background for his theatre play. In the area he lived, this word was called *kürsiyye* and had a very strong cultural significance, so that is was difficult for him to transpose the term in Turkish. Hence, the difficulty to transfer a message from one culture to another in the same country. The major problem is related to the signifier/signified relation, because even in the case of the same country, the signifier can signify something else that it is socially signifying in another region. The examples offered by Kaya are very illustrative and rely on historical, psychological and ideological basis of inconvenience between the two cultures involved in the translation process (French and Turkish). His conclusion is that the translator has a great responsibility in terms of comprehension, and moreover, knowledge of the author’s *vouloir dire*, of his ideology. His transcoding work becomes a veritable investigation of the history, sociology, economy and ideology of a text. Thus, the translator becomes a mediator, with a sense of diplomatic issue, between two languages and sometimes between two cultures among the same language.

The promoters of translatability, as Mary Snell-Hornby (1995) remarks, rely on the relationship between reality and thought in favour of the former. The universe is linguistically determined, according to the Neo-Humboldtian theorists, but they did not take into account the natural evolution of the language. In other words, it is normal that a word like *snow* that we mentioned above signifies more for an Eskimo than for an inhabitant from the equator.

A midway position has been adopted by scholars who introduced the notion of “relative equivalence” between the source language and the target language. One of the most important theorists describing this process is Eugene Nida (1964, 1969), who refers to the ‘capacity for adjustment’ of languages. But the strongest argument for translatability is the very existence of universals in language, thought and culture. Languages are particular cases of *lingua universalis*, so that human reason can be rendered in all languages. This theory is based on R. Descartes’ and Leibnitz’s theories about the notion of *tertium comparationis*. Nida (1982) states that all languages have the same classes of referents: entities, activities, states, processes, characteristics, relationals, whereas power relations, solidarity and religion characterise every cultural community. The various
differences between languages can be solved through the specific expressive resources of each language, by operating at the Saussurian level of parole rather than that of langue.

Any remark on the translation of cultural elements must take into account the fact that translation has always offered many possibilities of confronting different cultural realities, hence questions about the areas of cultural production, the processes of cultural transfer, the negotiation of differences, but also questions about untranslatability, incompatibility, in order to arrive to the well known problem of traduttore-traditore. In other words, to translate means to perceive our own culture reported to the others’ cultures. As the structuralists claim for, the use of language as a means for communication between people underlines its social function; each culture has its own language. As a result, Humboldt shows the fact that every community talk about their thought and ideas in reference to their own way of perceiving the universe, to their intellectual knowledge and experience. In other words, culture is the implicitness shared by a community.

For Lévy-Strauss (cited in Clouet & Sánchez Hernández 2003-2004:72), culture may be considered as an assembly of symbolical systems, language occupying the first place. Then follow the matrimonial rules, economical issues, arts, science, religion. All these systems express some aspects of the physical reality and of the social reality. So, what the structural anthropology aims at is dressing a list of cultural materials always identical from one culture to another in order to overpass the particularistic approach and find a common capital of humanity, in which each culture can elaborate its specific models. In the case of translation, Pierre Guiraud (1983) invites us to talk about social signs rather than culture. He classifies as social signs the signs of identity (uniforms, decorations, names, trademarks, hair cuts, etc.), signs of politeness (different formula, prosody, etc.), rituals, fashion, games, etc. Some theorists argue that this classification is not entirely appropriate but it shows the complexity of the translation problems concerning the cultural elements in a community.

3 Strategies for the translation of culture-bound terms

The examination of different translation strategies (calque, transposition, modulation etc.) shows the complexity of the translation process. Jiří Levý (1969) remarks that the faithfulness to one aspect of the source text is always compensated by the unfaithfulness to some other aspects. We may think at the very well known question asked by Georges Mounin, “Faithful translation, but faithful to what?” Some of the translation strategies of comparative stylistics involve cultural aspects, especially when talking about equivalence and adaptation. They try to respond to the very problem of how to translate ‘correctly‘ from one language to another, from one culture to another. Nida and Taber (1964, 1969) deeply analyse the problem of cultural translation, the way in which it is encapsulated by language, providing classifications of cultural terms according to five major fields: ecology, material
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Culture, social culture, ideological culture, linguistic culture. Some isolated lexical items including cultural false friends (e.g. English and Romanian lyceum and gymnasium), idiomatic cultural set phrases (e.g. to bury the hatchet, to wear a feather in one’s cap, etc.) and collocations (e.g. the English distinction between lesser known languages, major languages and minor languages has no correspondent in Russian) account for some kind of ’loss’ throughout the crossing of cultural borders (cf. Dimitriu idem:71).

Different theorists have provided different procedures of translating culture-specific concepts. For instance, Graedler (2000:3) suggests making up a new word or explaining the meaning of the source language expression in lieu of translating it. But the translator may also choose to preserve the source language term intact or to opt for a word in the target language which seems similar to or has the same ’relevance’ as the source language term.

Harvey (2000) defines culture-bound terms as the terms which “refer to concepts, institutions and personnel which are specific to the source language culture” (2000:2). Consequently, he offers four major techniques for translating these terms. The first one refers to functional equivalence. This technique implies using a referent in the target culture whose function is similar to that of the source language referent. There are different opinions concerning this method: Weston (1991:23) describes it as 'the ideal method of translation‘, while Sarcevic (1985:131) says that it is 'misleading and should be avoided'. The second technique is the formal equivalence or 'linguistic equivalence‘, i.e. a word-for-word translation. The third one refers to transcription or borrowing. In other words, reproducing or transliterating the original term. This technique is part of the source language-oriented strategies. If the term is transparent or is explained in the context, it may be used alone, otherwise transcription is followed by an explanation or a translator’s note. Finally, there is a descriptive or self-explanatory translation, according to which the translator uses generic terms to convey the meaning. It is appropriate in a wide variety of contexts where formal equivalence is considered insufficiently clear.

Another important translation scholar, Peter Newmark, proposes different translation procedures (1988:82-91):
- Transference, which is the process of transferring a source language word to a target language text. Harvey (2000:5) called it transcription.
- Naturalization, technique which consists of adapting the source language word first to the normal pronunciation, then to the normal morphology of the target language.
- Cultural equivalent, i.e. replacing a cultural word in the source culture with a target language one.
- Functional equivalent, requiring the use of a culture-neutral word.
- Descriptive equivalent, which supposes that the meaning of the culture-bound term is explained in several words.
- Componential analysis: “comparing a source language word with a target language word which has a similar meaning but is not an obvious one-to-one
equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components” (1988:114).

- Synonymy provides a near target language equivalent.
- Through-translation, implying literal translation of common collocations, names of organizations and components of compounds. It is also called calque or loan translation.
- Shifts or transpositions, technique which involves a change in the grammar, for instance the change from singular to plural or the change of a source language noun group to a target language noun etc.
- Modulation, which occurs when the translator transmits the source text message in the target text in conformity with the current norms of the target language.
- Compensation, supposing that the meaning in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part.
- Paraphrase: the meaning of the culture-bound term is explained.
- Couplet occurs when the translator combines two different procedures.
- Notes, which are additional information in a translation. They may appear in the form of footnotes. Some theorists consider that too many footnotes in a translation are inappropriate with regard to appearance, but they can explain for the target audience many of the source text contents. Nida (1964) favours the use of footnotes as fulfilling at least two functions: to provide supplementary information and to call attention to the original’s discrepancies.

Allusions are really troublesome area for translators, because they seem to be culture-specific portions of a source language. All kinds of allusions, but especially cultural and historical allusions, need to be explicated in the translation for the target culture.

For the skopos theorist and functionalists, such as Vermeer, Reiss, Nord, Witte (cited in Baker 1997:305), culture is inextricable bound to translation. They adopt a social perspective on culture, so that functionalists consider that communication (translation too is a form of communication) is oriented towards particular goals, which assign particular text functions to texts and generate culture-specific text-types. By adopting extra-textual factors besides the cultural ones, J. Holz-Mänttäri (1984) and C. Nord (1991, 1997) make an in-depth analysis of the act of translation and the cultural exchanges involved. Nord even uses the term *linguaculture*, in order to show the tight connection between these concepts. Other theorists (e.g. Hervey & Higgins 1992) consider that the translation strategies dealing with culture-bound terms vary between the two poles of exoticism and cultural transplantation (or naturalization). Dimitriu (2002:72) gives as example the opening of Hamlet’s monologue, *To be or not to be: that is the question*, translated in 1887 as *Să mai trăiesc, ori să mor? Ce greu e de dezlegat cimilitura aiasta!* The excessive naturalization of the translation totally annihilated the loftiness of the original.

Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, in the collection of essays *Translation, History and Culture* (1990), go beyond language and focus on the interaction between translation and culture, since culture constraints translation.
The move from translation as text to translation as culture is what Mary Snell Hornby (1990) names 'the cultural turn', as a metaphor for this cultural move. *Translation, History and Culture* represents the beginning of an era in which the cultural turn has held a major place in translation studies. Jeremy Munday, in *Introducing Translation Studies* (2001:127-141), presents three areas where cultural studies have influenced translation studies in the 1990’s: translation as rewriting (development of systems theory), translation as gender and translation as postcolonialism.

André Lefevere, in his *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), developed his works on translation and culture. He carefully examines the factors that influence the reception, acceptance or rejection of literary texts, among which power, ideology, institution and manipulation. According to Lefevere, the people involved in such power positions are those who are “rewriting” literature, on ideological or poetological basis. Lefevere gives the example of Edward Fitzgerald, translator/“rewriter” of the Persian poet Omar Khayyam. Fitzgerald considered Persians as inferior, which is why he took all the liberty in translation, in order to “improve” the original, to make it more suitable for the Western culture. As the author remarks (cited in Munday, 2001:128), “Translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting and … it is potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin.” The literary system is controlled by three main factors: professionals within the literary system (critics and reviewers, teachers, translators), patronage outside the literary system (publishers, the media, a political class or party, national academies, academic journals, educational establishments etc.) and the dominant poetics (literary devices – genres, symbols, leitmotifs, prototypical situations and characters – and the concept of the role of literature, i.e. the relation between literature and the social system, the role of institutions in determining poetics.

Inevitably, translation studies has adopted other positions than purely linguistic ones and entered into contact with other disciplines. Sherry Simons (1996) states that the term 'culture' is too often used as an unproblematic reality. She approaches translation from a gender-studies angle, arguing that there is a language of sexism in translation studies, with its images of dominance, fidelity, faithfulness and betrayal. The feminist theories are close to the image of *les belles infidèles* (Georges Mounin) in the seventeenth French century or to the George Steiner’s male-oriented image of translation as penetration (*After Babel*). These theorists have found a relationship between the status of translation and that of women. Simon proposes a translation project: “For feminist translation, fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project – a project in which both writer and translator participate.” (Simon 1996:2 cited in Munday 2001:131). The author gives as example some Canadian feminist translators from Quebec who seek to emphasise their identity and ideology in their translation (such as Barbara Godard). Consequently, she presents some translation strategies advanced by another feminist translator, Susanne de Lotbinière-
Harwood, who wants to make language speak for women, to make the feminine visible in the translation. Sherry Simon discusses the treatment of linguistic markers of gender. One of them is the use of bold ‘e’ in the word *one* in order to emphasize the feminine, capitalization of ‘M’ in *HuMan Rights* to show the implicit sexism, the neologism *auther* (as opposed to *author*) as for the French *auteure*, the female personification of nouns with the English pronoun *she*.

At the end of her book, Simon underlines the role of the cultural turn in translation: “Cultural studies brings to translation an understanding of the complexities of gender and culture. It allows us to situate linguistic transfer within the multiple ‘post’ realities of today: poststructuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism.” (Simon 1996:136 cited in Munday 2001:133)

Sherry Simon thus links gender and cultural studies to postcolonialism, following the Bengali critic and translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The latter focuses on the ideological consequences of the translation of Third World literature into English. She speaks out against the Western feminists who expect feminist writing from outside Europe to be translated into English. Such translations are rendered in what Spivak names ‘translationese’, eliminating the identity of politically less powerful individuals and cultures. In her view, the politics of translation gives prominence to English and the other languages of the ex-colonizers. Translations from Bengali often fail to translate the essence of the Bengali view, because the translator over-assimilates it so as to make it accessible to the Western readers. In order to avoid this situation, Spivak recommends to the translator to understand very well the language and situation of the original. The link between colonization and translation is explained by the active role that translation played in the colonization process. Postcolonial translation studies has taken many forms, thoroughly analysed by Susan Bassnett and Trivedi. We just give as an example Brazilian translation studies and its metaphor of anthropophagy or cannibalism, developed in the 1920s by Oswald de Andrade (cited in Munday, 2001:136). In his *Manifesto Antropofágico*, he presents the famous story of the ritual cannibalization of a Portuguese bishop by native Brazilians. This metaphor has been used since then in the case of the Brazilian translation studies community in order to depict the experience of colonization and translation: the colonizers and their language are devoured. This aspect of cultural translation studies has been analyzed by Haroldo de Campos and Else Vieira (cited in Munday 2001:136-137).

4 Conclusions

We can observe that cultural studies has taken an increasingly interest in translation theory and practice. These new cultural approaches have widened the horizons of translation studies. We may ponder on Lawrence Venuti’s “invisibility” of the translator in Anglo-American culture or ‘domesticating’ and 'foreignising' translation strategies. We may also conclude by Venuti’s very insightful words concerning the way translated texts are read in the target culture:
A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or non-fiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’. (Venuti 1995:1, cited in Munday 2001:146)

According to the great amount of translation strategies and methods offered by scholars, the translation of culture is, to a certain degree of acceptability, possible. It is the case of functionalist theories, for example, because from a pure linguistic position, not only the translation of culture but even the translation of each word becomes impossible. Finally, translation is part of culture. **Stricto sensu**, it is culture. And its very existence proves the possibility of entering a different world, a different vision and community through a translator’s genuine work.

**References**


