

Enhancing the Perception of Alterity through Cultural Translation

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Abstract:

Taking into consideration cultural notions in the translating process has become unavoidable. Culture illustrates various aspects of a language and plays an important role in a relevant transfer of meaning from the source audience to the target one. Consequently, “Cultural Translation”, a concept based on the significance of cultural characteristics of a language, is receiving much scientific attention from specialists of the field. Accordingly, the main objective of this paper is to shed light on the main aspects that contribute to the consolidation of this concept. It seeks to analyze how its implementation can be based on a conjunction of contexts and elements that are so essential at the moment of exploring the idiosyncratic aspects of a given language. This paper illustrates the importance of translation’s mediating role in a globalized and multicultural world where ethnic diversities and the different cultural specificities are constantly confronted. It also stresses the importance of respecting some inescapable features supposed to optimize the efficiency of Cultural Translation.

Keywords: Globalization; Mediation; Otherness; Negotiation; Post colonialism

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1. Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century knew a major shift in the field of translation. The objective moved from a strictly interlingual approach to a different one based on the inclusion of cultural elements in any translating attempt. Cultural specificities have, thus, become essential not only at the level of the source language but also at the target one. Moreover, a concept commonly called “Cultural translation” appeared in a new intellectual framework reflected through a historical context characterized by major international, political and social mutations. So, the objective of this paper is to clearly analyze this dimension of translation and highlight the specific characteristics of that historical context, the main factors that contribute to the implementation of Cultural Translation as well as the main objectives that can guarantee its adoption.

2. The significance of culture in translation

The specific cultural aspects of a language are fundamental to the translator to achieve his interpreting mission. Any language is based on some intrinsic characteristics taken from essentially the language community representing it (Gumperz, 1982). The role of the translator within the framework of Cultural Translation consists in identifying the appropriate and relevant extra linguistic elements provided by a text in order to achieve an efficient and faithful translation which better reflects the meaning and the intention and the intricacies of the source text (Bandia, 2008). So, translation can be considered as a cultural process which takes into account not only the texts’ informational elements but also all those specific, subtle details that transform a particular source into a unique one. Thus, the literal interpretation of a text is no longer the ultimate objective, it should also be associated to that vital capacity of identifying implicit, cultural details and interpreting particular nuances that are so essential in differentiating a content from another. The mastery of a source text’s complexities is, thus, fundamental to the whole interpreting process; it also helps to reinforce its accessibility. According to Pitkin (1972) language is a carrier of culture; when exposed to a particular language, people tend to enrich their general knowledge about origins, areas, habits and civilisational processes related to a special cultural context.

Cultural translation can also be seen as the ability to achieve cultural transfers from the source language to the target one. In his attempt to define the different specific connotations related to a cultural group, the translator crosses boundaries to find the different elements that can constitute a kind of cultural patchwork (Espagne, 2013). To achieve such an endeavour, he should be adequately equipped with a wide range of skills that form a cross-cultural competence, as it is explained by Williams (2001) who considers cultural competence as "the ability of individuals and systems to work or respond effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served" (p.1).

Accordingly, the cross cultural competence invites a person to respect and identify the specificities of other cultures by considering a series of elements such as some special ethnic behaviours, moral values, religious beliefs, historical considerations, etc. Consequently, communication between the two sides is positively constructed. On the other hand, ignoring these important aspects can lead to a stalemate and an absence of any type of cultural exchanges. Besides, a comparative approach can also take place in order to better understand why a culture is so different from another, and how these differences can be useful for more efficient intercultural collaborations.

2.1 Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of Cultural specificities

Homi Bhabha is one of the most prominent figures of Cultural Translation. This Indian Cultural theorist, who focused in many of his works on post colonial issues, has played a crucial role in highlighting the inescapable impact of culture when dealing with interpretation of alien cultural contents. In one of his reference books "Location of Culture", he puts forward the communicative side of Cultural translation which serves to draw links with various and different cultural backgrounds. According to him, when translating, people are communicating their differences and sharing their specificities, creating a fruitful intercultural environment. Besides, in his attempt to explain why culture is so important when trying to transfer meaning from one language to another, this Indian researcher has coined a concept called the "Third Space" where he advocates a cultural and linguistic "hybridity" that can involve individuals coming from different origins, able to enrich a setting of cultural exchanges. This setting is described by him as a kind of "cosmopolitanism" which should contest any racial exclusion or rejection. He also advocates, in the same reference, a resistance against what he describes as a cultural authority. Indeed, individuals should negotiate their own cultural traits to go beyond fixed traditional postulates. These people should also assert a type of differentiation which can defend their own values and identities.

2.2 Sarah Maitland's approach of Cultural Translation

Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, Maitland's conceptualization of Cultural Translation relies on a wide range of aspects that reinforce the translating act. In her major work, "What is translation?", Maitland, an adept of Hermeneutics, considers Translation as the ability to produce meaning rather than adopting an interlinguistic process. According to her, meaning is negotiated and adapted by the translator who takes into account different parameters such as the context, the historical background as well as various social parameters that can contribute to interpreting a specific situation. She believes that cultural translation also tends to highlight the reader's ability to decipher different cultural codes. His values, beliefs and background can, then, be crucial in analyzing the translated content. This approach constructs a personalized act of translation essentially based on the reader-audience perception of cultural specificities. Besides, Maitland rejects any

kind of cultural discrimination which can reduce the reader's capacity to explore other possible options that can enrich the translating process.

3. Cultural translation in a globalized world

One of the most significant features of modern life is the dominant global character of the present world. Means of transport, technological advances and commercial exchanges have all contributed to a reduction of physical and non-physical distances between the different areas of the globe. Consequently, this multidimensional globalization has become a field of other types of exchanges where an appropriate cultural translation is playing a central role. According to Bielsa (2005), global connectedness considerably depends on the pivotal function of translation in reinforcing the basic foundations of globalization. People are more likely to discover foreign traits belonging to other civilizations, reinforcing a universal context where daily interactions, involving different actors, have become unavoidable thanks to translation. Today, this globalized world is reflecting a hybrid civilizational setting where a mastery of the norms of Cultural Translation is crucial when connecting people (Appadurai, 1996). Indeed, moving from the source text to the target one depends significantly on the translating ability of making unknown cultural features understood.

3.1 The impact of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism represents another outstanding feature of modern life. Different reasons related to economic, cultural and political factors pushed millions of persons around the world to migrate to areas supposed to offer better conditions of life. These areas, principally situated in western countries, started to host populations with different identities and cultural backgrounds. This situation generates a particular environment to which both natives and migrants should adhere. Accordingly, an idealistic environment would witness an implementation of an effective Cultural Translation which should respect the identity and cultural specificities of individuals. There should also be between natives and displaced people a type of collaboration at a linguistic and cultural level to build up a tolerance towards the mutual differences. Each side is invited to adopt the other's conception of life and avoid any attempt of cultural coercion in which one side tries to oblige the other to adopt his own values and beliefs. In this respect, Van Elteren (2003) mentions that:

The "traveling cultures" idea focuses on how cultural languages travel to new areas and are appropriated by people of other cultures to tell their own story, a process that transcends stable, unified national cultures. This approach looks almost exclusively at the receiving end of these encounters, and as a result tends to overemphasize the active appropriation of cultural forms and to neglect cultural imposition through behavioral and structural forms of power. (172)

Accordingly, an environment where multiculturalism is omnipresent also encourages some tendencies based on negotiation between the original source and the target one. Such a negotiation tends to eliminate obstacles towards a cultural collaboration between people of different origins (Ecco, 2004)

3.2 Post colonialism

In a significantly globalized world, countries and societies are constantly interacting with each other at different levels. These frequent encounters can take various forms. As a matter of fact, a kind of collaboration can emerge from these interactions in which the cultural background of each side can have an influence on the nature of a debate based on civilizational relations. Nevertheless, there exists another factor which, linked to culture, can determine and impose the kind of balance of powers between two cultural entities. Indeed, the different historical periods and events contributed to creating well established cultural categorizations which sometimes are unavoidable at the moment of dealing with an alien cultural group. Some implicit guiding principles, essentially inspired from past elements, can structure the development of cultural and linguistic contacts that can take place between different groups, favouring one origin over the other. Post-Colonialism, for instance, is an example of those historical factors which can play significantly an important role when two cultures are trying to mutually interact. The symbolic dimension of the colonial legacy may reinforce the superiority of one culture at the expense of another. To remedy that, the concept of Cultural Translation can intervene in order to pacify unfair situations where a group can be the victim of its past vulnerability (Bhabha, 2012).

The Post-colonial era has coincided with the different waves of colonized countries' auto-determination. So, a new period started with different types of interactions, supposedly rejecting any dominance of one country over another. It is a period which is likely to know new attitudes in the relations between the different cultural groups. Nevertheless, old behaviours and postures still resist these changes. They are the result of centuries of solid cultural representations of alien civilizations. Accordingly, many pervasive tendencies, originating from some former colonizing countries, carry on reinforcing hegemonic positions. In this regard Ribeiro (2004) asserts that:

[I]f we can think of hegemonic globalization as globalization without translation, the very idea of a counter-hegemonic globalization is totally dependent on a notion of translation, since it has by definition to be critical of any centralism or universalism and cannot rely on any transcendental principle,

but, instead, has to go along through providing the means for the articulation of cultures and intercultural interchange. P.3

Besides, a neo colonial attitude can also seek to impose a homogenising form of cultural relations (Conversi, 2009); it tries, through different commercial and cultural vectors, to impose a universal model where former preconceptions are insidiously embedded. In this regard, the role of Cultural translation, in its attempt to transmit meaning from the source language to the target audience, is essential to establish a healthy cultural dialogue where the objective consists in establishing an atmosphere that should exclude former cultural stereotypes. Translation, through its process of comprehension of cultural idiosyncrasies, can also solve the problem of atavistic visions of things. Translating texts can be an efficient way to organize resistance against any kind of cultural determinism which can be the result of previous unfair mutual interactions. Paradoxically, this same translating process could play in the past a strong colonizing arm which played the role in showing and demonstrating the superiority of a race over another. That historical context transformed translation into an alienating colonizing agent. Now, this transfer of meaning from one language to another serves rather to make people forget a sad past and start a fairer period, based on a much more cultural equality.

4. The mediating dimension of Cultural Translation

The coexistence of several cultures within the same environment paves the way for a translation based on cultural aspects in order to play a efficient mediating role. The objective consists in bridging gaps and conciliating differences to optimize cultural dialogue (Al-Sofi & Abouabdulqader, 2020). Translation is, then, used as a factor of a civilisational collaboration supposed to foster initiatives based on empathy to better understand others' specific features (Bhabha, 2007). Fair interactions between different ethnic groups take place thanks to a translating force meant to reduce distances between foreign historical and cultural backgrounds. Peaceful cultural encounters are possible because Cultural translation seeks to explore beyond the purely linguistic level (Assad, 1986). Besides, a translator, who prioritizes an approach based on a comprehension of different visions, moral values and beliefs, creates communicating channels which can improve the quality of exchanges and promote tolerance towards those who are different. Thanks to his mastery of cultural competence, the translator is able to interpret efficiently different worlds (Eyckmans, 2009). His exploration of the unknown leads to the establishment of a common space, where different cultures can fairly collaborate thanks to the conciliating role of the translator who can mediate communicatively to enhance the perception of alien identities. (Valero, 2018). Translation becomes, then, a crossroad where identities meet to enrich a global cultural debate. The latter can be substantially enriched thanks to precious contributions provided by a translator more apt to highlight what other identities can culturally bring.

5. The concept of “Alterity”

Differences are the most common elements to which a translator is confronted when trying to transmit meaning from one language to another. So, his mission consists in having the ability to interpret these alien details that are closely linked to a particular culture and that can be so peculiar to the target one. This process of transferring civilisational elements from one cultural context to another implies, thus, a tendency to adopt an intercultural approach as a way to better apprehend the idea of “Otherness” (Taylor, 1994). The latter represents the kind of aspects that invite the translator to go beyond the linguistic mechanisms proper to a specific culture, in order to deal more efficiently with the way the other is perceived. Indeed, a better perception of both the source and target language can contribute to reducing a constant tendency to stigmatize a cultural background when translating foreign meaning.

6. The mutual interaction between Anthropology and Cultural Translation

An efficient translating process is more likely to make use of a rich interdisciplinary range where different specialties can contribute to make the target audience understand the intrinsic sides of another language. This idea explains why a discipline such as Anthropology can be so precious when trying to analyse alien cultural universes. Anthropology explains the complex elements offered by the source language. It studies people, their cultures, their past and their values and so is the mission of the translator who needs vitally these elements to produce a faithful outcome. Consequently, he can reduce difficulties, to the maximum, leading to an optimal cultural understanding. People from different cultures can share similar characteristics but perceive elements differently (Putnam, 1975). So, it is the role of the anthropologist to illustrate these perceptions to better reduce the intricacies proper to each language. Besides, it is worth highlighting the very close and mutual relationship that exists between anthropology and translation. In fact, translation can be assimilated to an aspect of anthropological knowledge (Needham, 1972). Thus, both the translator and the anthropologist help systematically people to understand things that belong to other cultures.

7. Conclusion

In its attempt to prioritize languages’ cultural traits, Cultural translation tries not only to achieve a relevant translating act, but also to adapt to a specific historical context significantly characterized by multidimensional exchanges between cultures and individuals. This present globalized aspect of the world invites the translator to take into account the cultural differences of both the source and the target audience to produce a fair and well balanced perception of specific situations. The translator starts to have a mediating role to facilitate communication and cultural interactions between the different protagonists of the same environment. Cultural translation also allows some social categories, like displaced people, to affirm their identities by negotiating the elements of their own cultural background, to be intelligible and integrated in the host country. In fact, in such a post colonial era, old discriminating stereotypes should no longer take part in cultural debates. So, Cultural

translation comes to eliminate any kind of determinism and strives to foster better comprehension of groups and individuals to fulfill successfully translating acts.

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