Cultural Factors Determining Translators' Choices

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Abstract: Translation is a mediation activity with an informative, as well as formative purpose. Far from being an easy task, an appropriate translation must observe a set of rules, apply certain procedures and take into consideration the cultural specificity of the source text. But translation is also a highly subjective activity because, apart from all of the above, it is a matter of individual choice. This paper is aimed at showing that the translator's choice in the application of norms and procedures depends on his/her cultural background and on the tradition of the local culture.
Key words: cultural background, translator's choice, strategy

INTRODUCTION

The last few decades confronted translators with the most complex challenges in the entire history of translation. New developments at the level of theory, new strategies proposed for improving translation standards, and a renewed focus on the relevance of cultural specificity seem to have placed the difficulty of translators' task on a higher level.

The specific features of a globalized world have also influenced humanistic studies and, among them, the theory of translation. Research on cultural matters covers a large number of pages in the works of major theorists, and cultural interferences herald the emergence of altogether new concepts.

Such areas of interfering or overlapping cultures, called "*intercultures*" by Pym, are specific for "beliefs and practices found in intersections or overlaps of cultures, where people combine something of two or more cultures at once" [1998: 20, 24]. This is the mark of the 21st century - one in which cultures find more than one meeting point, and in which the mediating role of translations becomes even more important.

However, so far, few studies have been dedicated to the main actors in this field: translators themselves. It may seem surprising that theories abound in proposed concepts and norms, in suggestions about what should be done and how, yet remain indifferent to the problem of "who does it". Totally unfair, because, in our opinion, translation skills cover a wide range and they differ according to each individual. Just as it takes certain innate qualities and learned skills to become a medical doctor or architect, the same is valid for becoming a translator.

Are some people "born" to become translators? Are they born with that capacity to learn and understand foreign languages better than others? Or is it simply a matter of cultural background influence? Judging from the fact that, in certain cultures, the educational and training system for this specific profession has a longer and more fruitful tradition than in others, we can assume that the local cultural context does, indeed, influence the status of translators.

Being herself a translator, as well as a teacher in a faculty which is aimed at training future translators and conference interpreters, the author of this study strongly supports this opinion. Translation is a mediator between cultures - but it is due to translators themselves that this mediation takes place. And their cultural role at a national and international role must not be ignored or minimalized.

THE TRANSLATOR – A NEW TYPE OF BRAND

Translations are the product of human minds, and translators themselves belong to specific cultures, which are bound to influence their manner of thinking, the way in which they express themselves in verbal or written discourse, and the choice they make while processing a source text with a view to rendering it in a new language.

It is high time we left the end product – translation – apart for a while, and focused on the cultural and sociolinguistic processes underlying *translators'* decisions and choices.

The translator occupies "the central position" in what Nord [1991: 35] calls intercultural communication, that is, in the process of translating a text into a target culture. The translator is, at the same time, the ST recipient (because he/she receives a commission for a translation) and the producer – the "author" of the translated text. However, in Nord's opinion, the final purpose of the target text is what should govern translators' choices, and therefore they become just simple mechanisms governed by outer forces and acting according to "instructions". But can this be achieved in real life practice?

In modern economics terms, the success of authors and of their works turns them into international brands – and the degree of fame increases the development of those brands, thereby prompting the need for translating them into various other languages.

But translators can also become brands – though often just at local level - according to the quality of their previous works, as well as according to certain social factors (the position of a translator in a professional organization; the translator's presence in high-brow social and cultural milieus; personal exposure during important social or charity events; etc.). According to the main characteristics of any brand: (1) their names are remembered and recognized by readers, because positive connections are formed in the readers' minds, due to their satisfaction after reading a good translation; (2) they stand out in competition with other translators; (3) they create a positive image of "the translator" as a concept; (4) they give proof of optimal performance.

In other words, if readers feel a high level of trust towards the translator, based on satisfaction from previous translations (similarly to brand equity, that is, the positive feelings towards a brand), they are bound to be more loyal towards that translator, and search for other works under his/her signature. Conversely, once he/she becomes the recipient of favourable critical views from the readers, the translator must increase creative efforts in order to maintain his/her position, and consequently to receive more commissions.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE "CULTURAL BRAND" ON TRANSLATORS' STANDARDS

From a professional point of view, translators can be characterized from a *cognitive* point of view (with reference to their knowledge level and expertise), as well as from a *motivational* one (their assumed involvement in the work at hand, the expected moral and financial satisfaction resulting from it). Unlike other professions which imply team work, translating is mainly an individual type of activity, based on self-improvement as well as on "self-packaging", according to a strategy of personal development.

Individual character and behavioural features are, indeed, important, but the proposed hypothesis of this paper is that the specific features of the national cultural brand are also a major element in defining the translator and the quality standard of his work.

Due to the impossibility of getting into contact and establishing relationships with representatives of cultures all over the world, we tend to form opinions according to stereotypes or clichés. For instance, it is common knowledge that the English are calm and have a great sense of humour, that the French bear the mark of diplomacy, that the Italians are passionate and that Northern Europeans are more guarded in establishing new relationships. Hundreds of other examples can add to these. Such stereotypes have a degree of generality, and they may apply to professional activities as well.

At the same time, the more favourable the general attitude is towards a country, the higher the level of respect towards any cultural products originating in that country.

Translation is a highly specialized activity, which involves a great deal of research, the ability to make a fast and correct shift between two or more languages, as well as the ability of mentally adapting to different areas of knowledge, as required by each text under focus. But are we all, translators belonging to a certain culture, dependent on specific national features? According to Pym [1998] " We find that cultural factors (e.g. language

use or translators' strategies) tend to be the ones that are observed in [our] studies, whereas social factors (e.g. the social groups translators belong to) tend to be the ones used to explain the cultural factors."

We propose a number of cultural elements which may have an influence on the standard of the final work:
- local tradition in scholarly research
- local awareness of quality standards
- local tradition of social relationships (the habit of respecting deadlines, or of being late; the degree of efficiency; ambition; the positive response to social stimuli etc.)

Local tradition in scholarly research

All major cultures have a confirmed scholarly tradition. Translator training also depends on this tradition. Young learners are taught to aspire to higher standards, as set by their forefathers. The reputation of previous translators from earlier generations has a cultural determination and is bound to convince younger translators to continue the tradition. These are the cultures whose literature and scientific works are translated first, because of their fame.

The situation is more difficult in emerging cultures (e.g. in former colonies, in the post-colonial era) because the tradition is set by a different culture which leaves little space to manifestations of local individualism. Young scholars aim to set up a tradition and become known, but their chances are reduced due to a highly competitive environment. Such cultures start by translating major international works into their languages, and it takes longer time until their own literature is translated as well. In this case, translators from such cultures must overcome various psychological barriers (individually) and cultural dominance barriers (at national level).

Local awareness of quality standards

Although quality standards in translation now operate (at least theoretically) at international level - and among them we can quote the *Translator's Charter* approved at Dubrovnik in 1963 and amended in Oslo in 1994, the UN *Recommendation on the Legal Protection of Translators and Translations and the Practical Means To Improve the Status of Translators, International Property Rights Law* or various other documents regarding professional standards and the ethics of translation – in real life, translators' work largely depends on another cultural-specific element, which is the local attitude towards this type of activity.

If such attitude is negative, the unavoidable results, from the point of view of the translator, are underpayment, the acceptance of underpayment, the bending, if not total ignorance of a number of standards and the obvious effect of a low position, from a social and financial point of view.

Local tradition of social relationships

A country image also relies on the existence and efficiency of various regulatory mechanisms of a social nature. Social visibility is an important part in creating and preserving a brand image, and this is also valid for translators. Winning important local awards, participating in social or charity events increase one's reputation and chances of being promoted - becoming known to wider ranks of readers, home and abroad.

At the level of each translator, a strong personality, a high level of professionalism, the will to continue learning, ambition, introspection, along with participation to various social events - all these are of great help in increasing communicative skills and personal experience.

But certain local cultural trends of social nature are bound to either help or hinder translators' social image. Punctuality or the lack of it; the habit of respecting (or not

respecting) deadlines; rigour and competence are all cultural markers, whether or not we are aware of it, and they all influence the professional status and image of the translator.

A CHOICE OF STRATEGY, A CHOICE OF ATTITUDE

In the field of translation, strategies may refer to one's plan for a short-term or long-term personal and professional development, or to the steps taken in order to achieve a task.

If we refer to the approach to a source text in view of its translation, things are quite simple, or so they seem, because theorists have taken a great deal of time to devise various strategies meant to lead to good performance in translating a text. Nida [1964] proposed a set of strategies, going from technical procedures (of which the analysis of the source text, of its semantic and syntactic specificity is fundamental) to individual organizational procedures (assessments, re-evaluations of the translated/target text). Krings [1986] points to a relationship between the translator and the translation strategy, defining the latter as "the translator's potentially conscious plans for solving concrete translation problems in the framework of a concrete translation task", while Venuti [1998] includes the concept of "choice" when saying that translation strategies "involve the basic tasks of choosing the foreign text to be translated and developing a method to translate it".

Thus, said strategies become either the result of the systematic processing of alternatives, or a technique resulting from individual experience – in both cases, the individual human mind being responsible for the final result.

But the second type of strategy implies motivation and a different type of choice. Short term goals determine short term personal satisfaction; similarly, long term goals resulting from objective judgements determine a higher degree of self-esteem and a more active role within the cultural environment. Short term goals are determined by incidental emotional reactions; long term goals involve performance-based assumptions and expectations.

METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENT

The author of this study devised a questionnaire which was handed, by mail, to a number of 114 Romanian translators whose contact data are included in the database of the Romanian Translators' Association. The questionnaire included a number of 15 questions, among which: the reasons for becoming a translator; whether or not this was their only professional qualification; the amount of time dedicated to translation work; strategies applied in translation; theoretical norms applied; personal features as considered important for this profession (positive and negative); whether they work freelance or have a full time translation job; participation in social and other events, etc. Finally, the respondents were asked to give their opinion on the influence of "Romanian lifestyle" on their attitude towards work.

Out of the 114 contacted translators, a number of 86 responded to the questionnaire, giving a percentage of 75%. Their answers can be grouped as follows:

A percentage of 68% consider that the "Romanian lifestyle" influences their attitude towards work (this being the most relevant result);

Only around 15% have a theoretical background resulting from higher education (a proof that further efforts must be made in this direction in the future). This was an important result of the research, because it led to the conclusion that the same 15% are those who consciously and knowingly apply translation strategies proposed by theorists, while the others use only their talent and presumed strategies to perform the work at hand.

Half of the total number of respondents (50%) answered that translation is not their main professional activity, but an auxiliary one (besides teaching – 22%, journalism - 9%, engineering – 6%, sciences – 5%, or other – the remaining 8%).

Some of the personal features considered important in good translation performance were a good level of knowledge of the source language (82%), the use of

dictionaries (66%), seriousness and professionalism (42%), respecting deadlines (only 14% !), bilingualism (7%), being informed about quality standards (6%).

Interestingly enough, a large number of respondents (71%) proclaimed that good social relationships were a guarantee to becoming known and receiving praise. This is an important result from a psychological point of view, and it confirms the assumption that certain "cultural markers" (in this case, the tradition of relying on social relationships, in a post-communist society) are important in the area of professional expectations.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The author of this study started from the assumption that, in the context of globalization, the effect of cultural specificity is perceived not only in the result of translation work – that is, the translated variant aimed at satisfying the cultural needs of target language readers – but also in the translators' attitude towards translation strategies and methodologies.

Translators are perceived as brands that, under the influence of local culture specificity, increase or decrease their visibility on a national or international level.

Strategies, an important element in translation work, are seen here not only from the point of view of the stages of translation of a source text into a target text, but also from the viewpoint of personal development and image structuring.

The conclusion arising from this study – nevertheless submitted to time and space limitations – is that the "cultural brand" largely influences the attitude and working style of any translator. Specific cultural features (the local tradition in scholarly research, the local awareness of quality standards, and especially the local tradition of social relationships) were found to act as important variables in determining translators' attitude towards the source text and its translation, as well as towards their personal professional development as perceived according to short-term and long-term criteria.

These are only three of the possible cultural variables influencing translation performance. The author of this study intends to extend her research on larger samples of translators, both home and abroad, in order to emphasize the relationship between these and other variables, on one hand, and translator brands, on the other hand.

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