

THE CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN THE TRANSLATION ACTIVITY¹

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The comments I am going to make today have arisen from my practice and reflections as a translation teacher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. They are not meant to introduce new ideas or theories but rather to analyse some problems and barriers we — translators and translation students — encounter in our daily activity.

The issue of meaning transfer from one language into another remains the central question in translation studies. From different viewpoints, for decades, or rather centuries, this has been the concern of translation theorists, critics, research scholars and practitioners as well, and it brings us back to the old and always new controversy of translation possibility or impossibility, of the untranslatability of literary texts.

Georges Mounin in his *Les Problèmes théoriques de la traduction* (1967) confesses his bewilderment at the dilemma between linguistic theory which denied the possibility of languages intercommunication and the existence of many thousands of translated works. He says: “One could say that the existence of translation constitutes the scandal of contemporary linguistics.”²

From the seventies to this day, language studies have been focusing their object under a different perspective. Language recovered its condition not only of representation of reality but also of culture codifier and communication vehicle. Considered as a social practice, its social aspects — the concrete speaker historically situated, the situation itself, the context, the social structure and its relations to the text — were taken into consideration. No longer is language seen as a closed code in itself, isolated from its usage and speakers, but the message and its meaning now depend on the variables of time, place, speakers, culture and ideology.

Such an approach is favourable to a deeper analysis and understanding of the translation process and of the cultural and ideological barriers encountered in translation.

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² N.E.: Tradução da autora, assim como em todas as demais citações extraídas de obras publicadas em outros idiomas que não o inglês.

Translation is then understood as an activity which operates with the socio-cultural-ideological loads present in the core of linguistic codes. Under this viewpoint the ideal of fidelity becomes different, conditioned by the factors of time, space, culture, ideology, etc.

On account of the unattainability of total fidelity, translation theorists have searched for explanations of the problem while practitioners have sought solutions for it. Questions are raised: What is the purpose of translation? What is its social function? For whom do we translate, why and what for? How do we translate? Basic options are debated — the alternatives pointed out by Schleiermacher in the early 1800: a more literal translation driven towards the original in its values, proposals, cultural and ideological aspects and even in its formal traits, which Lawrence Venuti calls a “foreignizing” translation, or a version where the original message is interpreted according to the *Weltanschauung* of the target language community, receptor of the translated work, called by Venuti a “domesticating” translation, usually called “adaptation”.

The main question remains how to overcome cultural and ideological barriers in order to achieve a truthful rendering of the message, if the endeavour is altogether possible.

I do not intend to solve this secular issue but just to look at it from different angles so as to better discern its various aspects.

Let us look at it from three different approaches:

- that of the reader/translator’s reading of the written text in a foreign language.
- that of the divergent cultural contexts of different linguistic communities.
- that of the ideological factor interfering in the text production and comprehension.

The first and fundamental step in translation is the text decoding, that is, its reading and comprehension. By this we mean the total immersion in and the interpretation of the message there presented. Without a careful and absolutely total decoding, no translation can be satisfactorily carried out.

Then the following questions arise: What kind of cognitive process occurs when a person reads and understands a text? How does he/she grasp its meaning? What mechanisms does he/she use to interpret its message?

In an attempt to understand this we shall resort to the schema-theoretic explanation of reading and comprehension, according to which one understands a text by applying to it the mental patterns (schema) stored in one's mind, resulting from one's organized individual experience.

Adams & Collins (1979) say that “spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning. Rather, a text only provides directions for the listener or reader as to how he should retrieve or construct the intended meaning from his own previously acquired knowledge.”

J.L. Meurer (1985) states: “Reading comprehension is a function of the nature of the text itself and of the extent to which the reader possesses, uses and integrates pertinent background knowledge or schemata.”

Thus, what happens when a person reads a text in a foreign language which represents an alien culture? When a reader/translator decodes a foreign-language text, he activates his mental patterns, derived from his own culture, and applies them in the comprehension of a different, often divergent, culture represented in the text.

We may assume that a number of difficulties, conflicting ideas and divergences will naturally arise from such a situation. We may also conclude that the first obstacle to be overcome in translation originates from the schemata the translator will use to understand a foreign-language text.

The second part of our considerations refers to the divergent socio-cultural elements present in the linguistically different communities.

Culture is such a broad term embracing various aspects of a community's life, that we would hardly have time to focus the theme here. Briefly, however, we should point to the close relationship between socio-cultural traits and language. Considering that each particular language constitutes a specific segmentation of reality, divergences will arise even in cultures relatively similar with different languages. When working with not very distant cultures such as those of the Western linguistic communities, satisfactory solutions may be found, although a certain amount of analysis and research will be required in order to link distant concepts and establish communication. If the translation work deals with distant cultures in time and space, the question becomes a puzzle requiring a thorough and deep analysis of both cultures to find a possible solution.

In Eugene Nida's work one finds numberless examples of the problems derived from the non-existence of conceptual similarity in both source and target culture. The frequent biblical references to the desert, a place with little or no vegetation and a common landscape in Palestine, had no meaningful reference for the Mayas who lived in the tropical Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico with lush and dense vegetation. How can that dimension, that metaphor and its implications be expressed in the translated work?

In relation to the different segmentation of reality in different languages, one finds complex and subtle differentiations of concepts that do not occur in another language. For example: Nida informs us that he found six different words for "noise" in Totonac, that is, noise of a child's cry, of people fighting, of a turkey's gobble-gobbling, of persons talking, of increasingly louder noise, or of a funeral.

One does not have to go so far to detect such conceptual discrepancies. In translating English into Portuguese our students have met with difficulties with expressions such as: "He was born on the wrong side of the tracks", for it refers to a sociological and historical fact — that of North-American villages being founded along the railroad tracks. The important and rich people settled on the upper part of the terrain, while the humble and poor ones gathered on the section across the tracks. This was not true of Brazilian early settlements. In instances like these, the translator must put aside the language level and work with the historical and sociological meaning present in the text.

Another problem created by cross-cultural questions that had to be faced in the classroom was in translating dialogues in North-American Negro dialect where the linguistic form is not the only problem, but rather how to express in another language the connotations and implications; the vital and emotional meaning of their linguistic code as a means of intra-group communication and defense against the white world outside. It is worth mentioning the doubt of an English language translator when translating a Brazilian novel about the impoverished Northeastern region and coming across an apparently incoherent phrase: "Ela é magrinha, magrinha... Só come farinha." "She is so thin... She only eats flour." According to North-American food habits, a person who eats only starch is not expected to be thin.

The third angle from which we want to look at the complexity of translation is the ideological factor.

What exactly is ideology?

Ideology is a vague and ill-defined term which ranges from system of ideas, vision of the world, to false conscience, dissimulation of reality. Generally speaking, ideology is that set of ideas, values and norms that indicate and establish to a certain society what its members should think, value, feel, and do and how they should think, value, feel and do. According to Marilena Chauy (1980), “An ideological discourse is one that intends to coincide with reality, annul the difference between thinking, saying and being.”

Voloshinov says that “language is the specific materiality of ideology”. Besides materializing ideology, language transmits and perpetuates it. It confirms the belief systems that legitimate the power institutions.

As we have discussed earlier, in translation two languages, which are the representation of two different cultures and ideologies, meet and relate. I call this *confrontation*, since in the translating process, in the translator’s mind, the universe of significations of one community, — denotations, connotations, references, experiences, imaginary, history, culture, ideology etc. — and that of another community, equally alive and powerful, are dynamically opposed.

It is the translator’s almost inhuman task to look for the unstable balance between those two universes and establish a link between them in a quasi-equivalence of meaning.

Once again I will quote an example from the Bible reported by Nida as he tried to translate the concept of *forgiveness*, fundamental to the Christian message, into the language of an African tribe where the relationship with the enemy was expressed by the law “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. He had to resort to anthropological studies of the community to find some kind of relationship in their conceptual universe to the concept of forgiveness.

I would like to cite the well-known example of the English version of Freud’s work, as criticized by Bruno Bettelheim in his article “Freud and the Soul” (1982).

According to Bettelheim, Freud’s original style, which appealed to the reader with evocative, everyday expressions, with strong emotional and associative power, in the English edition became a text full of medical terms derived from Greek and Latin, giving place to an obscure and dogmatic Freud who speaks through abstract concepts and constructions. For Bettelheim the English version distorts the essential humanism which permeated the original. Instead of a direct and personal relationship between

author and reader, analyst and patient, there is a theoretical one, a rational and emotionally distant attitude. In his opinion the English translators deliberately adapted Freud's theory to the scientific values and codes of the English medical institutions and scientific tradition so as to make it more easily acceptable. In doing so, according to Bettelheim, "instead of instilling a deep feeling for what is most human in all of us, the translations attempt to lure the reader into developing a scientific attitude towards man and his actions."

In the wide and all-embracing aspects of ideological presence in translation it should be pointed out its presence in language use itself, a fact that the student should be totally aware of.

Popular sayings are, in general, ideologically loaded. The well-known "Woman is the queen of the house", for instance, hides the division of society in two segments where one of them is considered superior to the other. Under the trimmings of royalty that give women power, beauty and majesty, she is persuaded to stay in the home, the place determined for her by the male dominant ideology. That same concept is present, maybe more crudely, in a quite different culture. In Guarani, an Indian language still spoken by the majority of the Paraguayan population, the word for "man" is "*cuimba-ê*", which means he who is the master of his language, while "woman" is "*cuñã*", meaning the devil's language, malevolent language.

If language is the materialization of ideology and not just the instrument of its transmission, the text itself, its organization and thematic structure, its selected syntactic and lexical forms, the presence or not of dialectal forms, the registers and linguistic variations used etc., are ideological expressions. Those are less explicit ideological marks, requiring a finer linguistic awareness to detect their presence, intention and effect.

If the lexical selection is an ideological indicator, an abundant lexicalization of a given concept or semantic field denotes its importance for that society. Roger Fowler (1985) states: "A language vocabulary may be considered a kind of lexical map of the concerns of that culture."

Similarly, ideology reveals itself in the text's syntactic structures and their organization. The use of transitivity with the presence of a clear agent indicates agentivity and responsibility, while the use of the passive voice or nominalizations attenuates or dissimulates agentivity. According to Gunther Kress (1985), "all aspects of

the syntactic (and textual) system of a language can be and are brought into play to express the ideological meanings articulated in discourse.”

Analysing the text of a news broadcast about public disturbances, Kress points out to the choice of modes the actions are presented — the active or passive voice — not as “a matter of truth or of reality but rather a matter of the way in which that particular action is integrated into the ideological system of the speaker...”

As I have said earlier in this presentation, it was not my intent to offer possible solutions for the translator’s dilemma of cultural and ideological discrepancies within his working languages, but just to raise some questions, hoping to shed light on our struggle in the quest of fidelity and truthful rendering of the message.

The dilemma is there and there it shall remain. It is inevitable and intrinsic to the nature of our work. Linguistic, cultural and ideological divergences are constitutive of the matter we work with. Our aim is to establish a link between cultures and ideologies in spite of the enormous difficulties that continuously threaten our efforts.

It is the translator’s function to practice a critical role and define his role for himself and his readers, what kind of work he wishes to do — a faithful translation, yes, as much as possible, drawing closer to the original text and revealing its formations, or coming closer to the target reader and his beliefs and worldview, regardless of the problems he may have to face.

Anyway, man’s spirit is powerful enough and man’s language is elastic and adaptable enough to overcome the enormous barriers which apparently hinder communication. The translators will go on pursuing their undertaking, in the saying of Milan Kundera, quoted by Paes, of “modest builders”, who “allow us to live in the supranational space of world literature, the modest builders of modern civilization.”

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