

■ THE SHIFTING GEOGRAPHY OF THE TRANSLATOR – DEFINING TERRITORY THROUGH PRACTICE

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Abstract:

The essay deliberates upon the changing scenario of the world of translating as regards the translator him/herself as a professional, the supports available in today's digital culture, the role big business plays and the basic values guiding the translator's choices. The fact that in the last 15 years or so, translation has now become worthy of the study of academics is, perhaps, an indication of not only how important translation is in the running of the world's affairs but as a discipline in understanding what sort of world we are creating for ourselves. The translator's practice, therefore, may help to shed light on the trajectory of this "brave new world" by charting the routes s/he has taken in the shifting geography.

Keywords:

Shifting geography; Globalisation; Hybrid roles; Decision-making; Culture

Resumo:

O artigo analisa o cenário instável do mundo da tradução no que concerne ao tradutor enquanto profissional, aos suportes disponíveis na cultura digital da nossa época, ao papel desempenhado pelas relações globais e aos valores fundamentais do tradutor que podem influenciar as suas escolhas. O facto de, ao longo dos últimos 15 anos, a tradução vir merecendo a atenção dos académicos talvez indique não só a importância que esta adquiriu na gestão dos problemas mundiais, mas também como disciplina que faculta uma melhor percepção do mundo que estamos a criar. A prática do tradutor pode, como tal, ajudar a esclarecer a trajectória deste brave new world ao traçar as suas rotas por uma paisagem em contínua mutação.

Palavras-Chave:

Cenário instável; Globalização; Papéis híbridos; Processos de decisão; Cultura

You me different;
 World world different;
 Language language different;
 Experience experience grow-up different...
 (Ella Mae Lentz)¹

The translator has always had to negotiate the shifting geography of the text, although one might add, why only the transitional nature of geography? Why not also take into account the changing nature of present history, culture, language, the values of a new economic order in a (globalised) technological age – and, of course, the conventions underlying all of them? The globalised liberal economy is based on information and how fast it may be exchanged through the medium of language. And language is culture. This being the case, there is an intricate network connecting technology and the tools it offers with culture and its multiple languages and discourses, all of which mark the trajectory of translation and the role of the translator in today's pluricultural societies.

Upon thinking back over my own experience as a translator, where my world used to be confined to (a paper copy of) the text, traditional dictionaries and glossaries and my own hard-won experience, all cluttering up the space around my manual (and later, electronic) typewriter, the phrase that comes to mind as I now sit at my latest Pentium with the internet a mouse-move away, is that I've come a long way.

Judging from what I have just written, it might be inferred that during the last 20 years, it is only the working tools that have changed. However, the very foundations of my translator's world have changed – particularly as from the early-1990s. Apart from the world suddenly opening up via the world-wide-web, mentalities, social organisation and cultures have changed; languages have changed, texts have changed and the nature of translating has changed. Translation is big business. It is a commodity that is bought and sold like any other although, in most cases, it goes beyond the merely tangible sphere in that it also acts as a mover of further business transactions. As such, it has now deserved the right to be studied on its own ground – however shifting it may be. That it has now gained academic recognition is, perhaps, an indication of not only how important translation is in the running of the world's affairs but as a discipline in understanding what sort of world we are creating for ourselves. But translation studies, cultural studies, comparative literary studies, new

¹ Poem taken from EDDY, Shauna Lee (1999): "Translation as the Meeting of Signed and Spoken Languages: The Trickster's Role in Mediating Deaf Identity Construction", in Duarte, 1999: 55-76).

directions in linguistic studies are all talking about things which the experienced translator has always felt at gut-level and has always tried to battle out silently during the act of translating. Academics are now saying that it is not good enough being a "self-taught" translator anymore. Experience is not enough. The translator in today's complex world needs the backing of an institutional training; s/he needs to have a notion about the theory of translating in order to cope with the challenges of the profession.² Furthermore, in the age of split-second information, the profession no longer implies the translator as a communicator, but as a transmitter of information which is being produced at high speed and often heedless of quality due to the fact that its functional capacity is paramount.³

Nevertheless, amid all this flurry of innovation and theorising, some things do not seem to have changed. There are certain requisites that seem to be constant, no matter what the time or the place. Translation has always depended on the sound knowledge of both the source and the target languages as well as a thorough understanding of topics dealt with in the text; one's cultural baggage and open-mindedness about the other's culture have always been decisive factors and the painstaking job of checking and rechecking one's work has always made part of the conscientious translator's routine.

Some problems seem to present themselves every time we translate. Take, for example, the problem of names and the social-cultural, and often the political-economic, environment that decides whether a word is still suitable or liable to be accepted in today's context no matter how general or specific the context is. Naturally, each discourse has its own linguistic or structural system (morpho-syntactical, lexico-semantic and orthographical-phonological systems) that works in harmony with other systems (textual, communicative, strategic, process, reflective and other systems making up the universe of language users). Words may fade away or undergo changes in meaning because they no longer express their original purpose; other words (new words, borrowed words, new combinations of words) become integrated into the lexis and may take on an iconic value. This is especially true after they have outlived their revolutionary impact and are absorbed into the landscape, whether in specialised fields of study or in everyday discourse.⁴

**Power today (...)
depends on our ability
to adapt, to be mobile,
to be fluid, to move fast,
to be flexible in our
decision-making...**

² The Minutes of papers delivered at numerous translation conferences insist on this point almost to a wo/man, following the institutional recognition granted translation studies as from the 1990s – see Lawrence's Ventuti's introduction to the 1990s in his *Reader* (2003: 331-342).

³ See Cronin (2001: 20-22; 65) for a discussion of transmission versus translation as communication.

⁴ Works of art and philosophies that were once considered revolutionary and outrageous have endured over time and have been incorporated into our mainstream Western cultural baggage. In this way, the fleeting quality of the cultural agent's struggle for the freedom to

No matter how competent translators are, how proficient they are in relaying the discourse that is typical of the field they are translating, how they strive to keep abreast of new developments and how efficient their research tools are, there is always the business of naming and renaming to be dealt with. A word that is poorly perceived and even more poorly translated can ruin an otherwise good translation. What's in a name? Obviously, its history and tradition (regardless of its novelty), its social and cultural charge and register, its appropriateness and suitability with regard to the entity it represents, its "correctness" according to standards. How do translators proceed along thorny lexico-semantic paths when it comes to translating new words, idiosyncratic words, culture-specific words? On what basis do we decide?

And this seems to be the translator's dilemma – *deciding*. Our first act in this decision-making is deciding who or what it is that decides. Who or what exerts the power? The translator is a mediator between two texts, two cultures, two different world views and the translated text is the effect of what is portable, what is carried over. Apart from rendering the translation comprehensible to the reader/listener it has to be comprehensible from the point of view of the original writer. It therefore has to be mobile and according to Zygmund Bauman (2000: 13), in this post-modernist era we need to "travel light". Power today no longer relies on resistance and stability: it depends on our ability to adapt, to be mobile, to be fluid, to move fast, to be flexible in our decision-making... Some of these decisions lie in the sense of refusing to decide, but letting others decide for us.

In 1967, Jiří Levý wrote an essay in tribute to Roman Jakobson where he put forward the theory that translation is like playing a game, where choices have to be made in order to proceed to the next stage (in Venuti, 2003: 148-159). His idea has not gone out of date despite the fact that he was speaking more from a structuralist position.

Who (or what) are some of the decision-makers and what decisions are made? In the international market – no matter what the commodity, be it information or education, cultural services or goods – the targeting has to be in localised national terms with local cultural referents. With this in mind, I shall be considering some of the most important factors at work when it comes to making decisions about translation. At top of the list come the client and the translator, and by implication, the target reading/listening public who are interdependent. The translator and customer – and in many cases, the reader/listener – are moved by market forces, no matter what the translation, although the translator has to be motivated in some way to consider undertaking the job that may not even be remunerated. Then comes the text itself – the power of the words on the page or screen or over the air. The text depends upon at

express his/her alternative vision dies, as Jean Cocteau said, in the moment of making. Or more exactly, it is "deployed in the service of its own cancellation" to use Zygmunt Bauman's words (2000: ix).

least five factors which demand some kind of decision-making on the part of the translator: the purpose, aim or destination of the text; the medium of the text; the genre; the rhetoric and, perhaps most important of all, the social and cultural context of the text, because the preceding factors all hinge on this unifying quality. There are two further factors exercising enormous decision-making potential and they are the translator's tools and resources and time constraints. Dare I add a last factor – satisfaction – which is the translator's intrinsic reward for a job well done?

Obviously, it's not possible to separate off these items because they all interact, they're almost inseparable and can't exist without the presence of the others. It goes without saying that text and context (in an exogenous and endogenous sense), or text and socio-cultural references are intimately tied up. That cohesion and coherence go together; that working on a computer with more easily available on-line tools reflects on quality, correctness, speed and timing.

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Sometimes, though, one of these items may throw things out of balance so that translation becomes a risky business, fit only for the insane as Francisco Magalhães once said (in Vilela, 1998: 25). However, many of the reasons Magalhães gives may well be the translator's fault and not that of the original author/client or the target language.

My concern in this essay is more about non-literary translations although some of my comments will apply to literary texts as well. In looking briefly at each of these decision-making entities, I shall begin with the client. What I mean here is the entity, institution, business enterprise, publisher, etc. who 'orders' the translation and pays for it. In my experience as both a free-lance translator and as a specialised translator working for an agency, the client fits into one of three categories and almost without exception places some kind of constraint on the translator. Working upwards from the private client, very often the translator is obliged to work closely to pre-established straitjacketing regarding terminology and syntax (which follow certain text-book models familiar to the client) or – at the opposite end of the scale – negotiate language that is ambiguous, esoteric or idiosyncratic involving hitherto uncharted lexicons. Unless dealing exclusively with one kind of specialised discourse, the terrain for most non-literary translators in Portugal is invariably irregular and risky because it involves many kinds of discourses demanding different kinds of knowledge.

The second kind of client is usually a business enterprise, a government office, an organisation which either wants a one-off technical translation or enters into a contract for a series of specialised translations in which the format and terminology are standardised. The third kind of client is the global enterprise with its headquarters usually in the USA or a European capital, etc. or is an official international organisation like the EU which wants translations of the same source document (usually in English) into dozens of languages. The original culture or philosophy has to be respected and conveyed into the target languages.

The client, therefore, is an ever-present spectre behind each translation. The bigger the client, the more fluid and unstable the work becomes as the translator is just a small cog in a giant wheel. Sometimes, meaning (and the meaningful quality of the work) is left behind in the rush to push out yet more information in the different languages. With the smaller client, a working relationship built up with the client and the satisfaction of the latter's wishes is obviously important for assuring more work. In this case, translation is a personalised service and in the liberal, market economy of today, business is assured if the service rendered has been satisfactory. Quality may not be the overriding factor provided other requirements have been met (e.g. conveying the informative content or speed so as to meet deadlines).

Over the last couple of decades, a lot has been said about the role of the translator as a mediator – as a go-between for the two texts and their meanings and impact. One of the most polemical issues among academics in the field of translation studies is the ticklish problem of the translator's visibility or invisibility.

Michael Cronin, in *Translation and Globalisation* stated that for pragmatic translations, "The better the translation, the more successful the medium and the more invisible the mediator" (2003: 125). That may be so but the translator will always have a voice – no matter how muted – and is always forced to make decisions regardless of how invisible he or she is in relation to the text. Post-modern (particularly gender studies) and post colonial studies go as far as advocating clearer translation visibility as the rights of minority communities are taken into account, as any current reader on translation theory will testify. In Portugal, as far back as in 1990, Carlos Leite asked some interesting questions that are still pertinent today about the translator's role as mediator. One of the questions Leite asked was to do with whether there was any risk of the translator's voice coming through by choosing language that would radicalize or soften (or correct or censor) the original text (in Vilela, 1998: 13). Because the translator is always an interpreter, as humorously asserted by Eco (2003: 123-132), and the interpreter makes choices about how and what is to be interpreted and translated, the risk may be courted deliberately. In the process of translating, an array of competencies is called into play that goes beyond the merely linguistic side of things. The process includes identifying, investigating, evaluating, predicting, selecting and implementing actions that all depend on what knowledge, world views, resources and practice we have as translators (see Basil Hatim, 2001: 189, for a schematic representation of the translator's action/practice research cycle). Nevertheless, if the text expounds ideas and practices which go against a translator's views, there is really

only one choice open, and that is to refuse to do the translation. The role of a mediator is also ethical.⁵

One of the risks a translator runs in an enduring, long-time contact with the source language is a form of acculturation in the target language. The translator is not infrequently faced with problems about how to translate certain terminology or expressions because the source language is interfering. Sometimes new expressions in the target language come as a surprise because the translator has lost touch and is beginning to sound 'a bit foreign' him or herself. The fact that English is all pervasive nowadays has also influenced source-language texts and some Anglicisms that have been incorporated into a language may change slightly in meaning.⁶

With English becoming a global language in the discourses of business, politics, science and entertainment, there is increasing need for local translators to translate into their own languages. From what already may be seen happening on the Portuguese market, there is also a growing need to translate local languages into international English used on a global level. With fewer and fewer foreign-language students enrolled in British and American universities (8.2% in 2000 in the USA according to Language International quoted in Cronin (2003: 36)) but more non-English speaking students enrolled in US, British and Commonwealth universities,⁷ the bulk of the translation work into English will have to be done by non-native speaker translators. While international English is deemed by many to be neutral because it seems to be ownerless, linguists have shown that it is the US strain that predominates in Asia and the Americas, as well as in Europe.⁸

As I mentioned earlier, the power the text exerts demands that the translator make choices according to its purpose or its destination. This means the client/author and

⁵ See the deontological guidelines for translators drawn up by the *Associação Portuguesa de Tradutores (APT)* which reveal that many of the translator's decisions are indeed, based on an implicit code of "translator ethics".

⁶ For example in Portuguese, *fazer a diferença* instead of *fazer diferença*; *passando pela* at the start of the sentence; *realizar*, meaning *tornar-se consciente* (as in English) instead of *fazer*; also *actualmente* meaning, realmente, instead of *presentemente*.

⁷ According to the on-line magazine, *Education Travel*, in "News", May 2004, in 2003/4 there were over half a million international students enrolled in US universities, and one third of a million each enrolled in universities in the UK and Australia. The Hesa UK and UKCoda statistics websites on higher education report that 16% of the international students in the UK were enrolled in first degree or post-graduate language courses. All international students are pursuing their studies in English, which makes them candidates for specialized translation into and from English work later on.

⁸ The very neutrality that international supposedly confesses is, in fact, far from neutral. It is the medium through which today's dominant ideological premises, socio-economic practices and technological innovations are diffused. International English is, in fact, owned by the prime movers of the neo-conservative liberal-market economy of today.

the translator should ideally take the reader/the listener into account; it is only in certain kinds of literature (poetry, for instance), that very particular authors refuse to acknowledge the reader at all. Having said that, however, due to the hybrid nature of internet texts and the cyberspace reading public, it is hard to discover who the public is in the first place. Both texts and public become disembedded, anonymous and "out there". Be that as it may, text is still tailored for this particular medium, although it is the medium rather than the target public that decides the text's content and mode of delivery. Again, with certain kinds of administrative or legal or political writing, as Bauman so tellingly points out, "the ends have become more scattered, diffused and uncertain" (2001: 125). Sometimes we wonder who we are translating for and what purposes it will serve. The mountains of paperwork for Brussels often make one wonder: "who's ever going to read it all; what's my translation going to be used for?" In other words, the job may turn into a meaningless translation exercise with no logical outcome to it.

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For translators such as myself, however, we usually have in mind at least a general idea of who our reading or listening public is. From a doctor's private report about a particular patient to a company report informing shareholders of the profit made that year, a tourist brochure, an academic essay or book, the public presence has to be recognised. Its cultural knowledge and referents have to be heeded, as David Crystal pointed out when talking about global publicity in terms of local referents.⁹ Many of the decisions text producers and translators have to take are based solely on the type of target public and call in account structural and communicative factors.

As I mentioned above, when referring to the nature of internet texts, the medium provides its own deciding factor according to whether it is for what are now known as the graphosphere (a paper medium), videosphere (celluloid and other audio-visual media) or the internet. I would go as far as saying that the medium is the message in many cases. An official document typed on the letter-head paper of the tax office tells its own tale, as do the lyrics heard on the sound waves of your walkman. Each medium has its own rules. Film subtitles, dubbing for films, TV translations of news bulletins and communiqués, where the visual, spatial or temporal components are sometimes decisive, require different stratagems on the part of the translator. If subtitling, what is the equivalence between the spoken word and the written word? Sometimes the answer lies in the translator's role as mediator and decision-maker, and involves ethical

⁹ In the BBC series, *Beyond Babel* (2001, part 1) when referring to Pepsi Cola's globalised market and its endeavour to reach local consumer markets through using local symbols and cultural icons in its filmed publicity.

choices and not so much choices about adjustment to the medium.¹⁰ Translation conventions are usually set by the companies but sometimes it is up to the individual translator to decide. Internet texts have become a new field of linguistic study for their registers, new lexis and interconnectivity but it is surprising how many of SL texts on the internet have failed to take this high-speed, open-ended medium into account. Does the translator have to doctor texts to fit, then? What are the choices open here? The question of translator visibility is raised yet again.

Perhaps a partial answer to these questions may be had when considering the genre of the text (e.g. journalist-informative, technical-scientific, publicity, administrative, literary, etc.) that decides on voice, style, register and tone. It is fundamental for the translator to know about genre. As a mediator, it is not enough to impose our own notions of what genre is. Genre is not stable, however, and may evolve along different lines or be held up for questioning and deliberately changed.¹¹ Different cultures have different perceptions of genre, but because translation is a modality of intertextuality, the translation process retains the referent in the SL and transcribes and represents it within another signifying practice.¹² It takes a while before we perceive how the culture of the other emerges in the text through the use of genre and rhetorical devices, and that this difference and distinctiveness should be preserved and transmitted. We cannot straitjacket the texts of others to fit in with our notions of suitability in the target language. However, having said this, should there be an on-going dialogue between the source-text producer and the translator, content and context may always be adapted, however slightly, to better suit the translator's idea of how readily the target reader/listener will perceive such cultural distinctions.

And this brings me to another choice the translator has to deal with. Certain voices, such as Venuti and Hatim – judging from the latter's research projects (2001: 45–46; 204–7) – defend the 'foreign note' in translations of other languages; they are highly critical of "domesticating" the original by absorbing and appropriating it. "Foreignising" translation indicates careful attention to the language of translation itself although it has been counter argued that 'foreignness' puts readers off because our eyes and ears are trained to expect only familiar or 'known' linguistic formulations and we can only make predictions based on how familiar the language is to us. Both Hatim and Venuti were no doubt thinking of literary texts. The brilliant translator of José Saramago's novels, Giovanni Pontiero, also conveyed this 'foreignness' and yet those who wanted

¹⁰ I am thinking of translating taboo words that are said in films but written in the subtitle.

¹¹ Nottingham University's challenge of traditional academic writing conventions are attracting increasing attention as British universities become internationalised.

¹² I am using the term intertextuality in Julia Kristeva's sense that meaning is built up through a process of semantically forging relationships within the text itself and not between other texts.

to read Saramago in English in the first place, did so with extraordinary pleasure. The subtitles of Japanese films also portray this foreignness and yet large numbers of us still go to see them. When we turn to non-literary texts, we have as an excellent example in the language used by the EU – no matter what translation, many EU texts sound eternally foreign, and yet are read and understood by thousands of bureaucrats. Functionally, the foreignness works, although it may be argued that EU-speak is nothing more than jargon, and as such, merely another working language.

The rhetoric of the text based on the linguistic manipulation of what language there is in the text, decides upon its morpho-syntax, lexico-semantic relations, phonology or graphology and what cohesive devices, among others, to use. The text's rhetoric may sometimes be the most problematic in the translation, forcing other issues into the background as we battle with sentence formation, sentence length, verb tenses, weighty nominal groups, embedded phrases, relative clauses that are strung out like sausages, not to mention the nightmare of abbreviations and acronyms. For some time now, the translation services of the EU in Brussels and Luxembourg have been aware of the need to streamline the writing of bureaucracy in all languages in order to improve understanding of texts at destination and ease the translator's burden.¹³ The "Fight the Fog" campaign has had moderate success but as the EU has its own metalanguage(s), the battle has been uphill.

I have left for last the text's social and cultural context which also includes its historicity. But perhaps the text hinges more on this factor than any other. The semantics of the text lie in the culture of both languages. Often they are influenced by the historical period in which a text is written. Here the client and the translator have to decide on how to deal with the dated quality of language. But many a translation has fallen down for lack of the translator's knowledge about a particular cultural or historical context. Do concepts behind words mean the same in every language? What is the discrepancy between the signifier and the signified in value-laden words, the historically significant words, the cultural coinages? Sometimes it's just common sense but being well grounded in the other's culture as well as one's own is half way to being a translator who grasps the underlying significance of the words, understands ambiguity, escapes dependency and respects diversity. Although the retrieval of information using technological tools fills the immediate gap, ultimately it takes time to acquire the historical and cultural knowledge of a foreign-language needed to give the qualitative jump in a translation.

¹³ Rosa Mesquita, head of the Portuguese Translation Service in Brussels, once gave a very interesting workshop (at the *UNIL - V Jornadas*, Faculdade de Letras, May 2001) on the type of language the "Fight the Fog" campaign is targeting (her examples concerned source texts in English).

With regard to the accessibility, reliability and worker-friendliness of the tools and resources at the translator's disposal, Michael Cronin had this to say: "Tools are not simply a convenient adjunct to the translator, but are central to definitions of what they do and have always done" (2003: 3). The pen and manual typewriter being replaced by the PC or film subtitling technology, or the manual dictionary being replaced by an on-line glossary have a say in the type of text being produced as well as its readership/audience. But as I mentioned before, the technology which translators have nowadays must go hand-in-hand with culture, just as it did when the monks were transcribing Latin texts into the vernacular on parchment. The fact that technological means have opened up new horizons in the choices available to us, makes decision-making all the more rigorous and time-consuming. And time, as we know, means money.

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There are different time factors or rather kinds of time affecting translations. The translator works with real time, and has to decide upon such logistic issues as how much time there is for research (virtual time/place if on the internet), working on the text itself and checking it before it goes out. We only perceive the importance of revision work when we note the absence of it. But there are also other time factors affecting the translator such as historical time that exerts cultural and stylistic influences particularly on literary translation. Or technological time, when innovation moves forward so fast, that local language development cannot keep up and it absorbs terminology from the hegemonic language. Think of all the English words that were incorporated into Portuguese literally overnight through marketing concepts and publicity or through being in contact with hi-tech. Quite often, there's no time to stop and translate at all – information-users just do it in English! There is also market time which has an implicit urgency-factor. Market time decides upon the gap between the speed with which a text leaves the translator's hands and the speed with which it will influence a course of events in the outside world. Today, with electronic time controlling business and politics, the notion of time has changed the translation business. From the politics of space we have gone to chronopolitics¹⁴ – the politics of time. The liquid nature of modernity that Bauman talks about, demands that technological advance and the paradigms accompanying it are understood and taken advantage of by the translators themselves.

Finally, do we have to be insane to be a translator as José Francisco Magalhães mentioned? I think not. So far, the intrinsic rewards of 'a job well-done' still count for

¹⁴ The word was first used by Paul Virilio and taken up by Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other*. An interesting article by John D. Kelly, called "Time and the Global: Against the Homogeneous, Empty Communities in Contemporary Social Theory" in *Development and Change*, No. 29, Issue 4, talks about chronopolitics in that the current elite diaspora has replaced the imperial conquests of bygone eras, precisely in the wake of decolonisation and the rise of UN ideology.

a lot. Precisely because translation is so important in running the world's affairs today, translators have been given a walk-on part in the play and they have begun to understand – the sort of world they are creating for themselves. What needs to change are certain mentalities regarding translation. Translators need to chart the routes they have taken in the shifting geography in order to find their own space and in so doing, map out their own future progress in a fluid world. And they can do this by examining their own practices and drawing up their own theories about translation. As Bauman says: "Translation is a process of self-creation and of mutual creation; far from exercising the translator's authority to put the translated in his right place, the translator must first rise herself (*sic*) to the level of the translated; but if translation creates the translated text, it also creates the translator" (2000: xlvi). ■

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