

Cultures in Contact through Translation

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Cultures come into contact directly (when members of one culture experience another culture at first hand) or indirectly (when they experience that other culture through the medium of their own language). In the latter case, when the original culture is not directly available to them, members of that other culture rely on translation for cultural contact.

Culture itself is broadly defined as the pattern of human behaviour and its products, including thought, speech, action, institutions, and artefacts taught to or adopted by successive generations. Notice that this definition includes also language — and indeed there can be little doubt that language is part of culture and not just a medium through which culture is expressed. Whether one subscribes to linguistic relativism or not, one cannot fail to recognize that the world is what it is for speakers of a given language depending, among other things, on the way that their language presents it to them. The expression *among other things* is meant here to imply that the weak rather than the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is accepted — namely, that a particular language facilitates rather than dictates the way that the speakers of that language will view the extra-linguistic reality.

The consequence for translation of this fusion of culture and language is untranslatability. To quote Sapir (1921: 237): *»The literature fashioned out of the form and substance of a language has the color and the texture of its matrix. The literary artist may never be conscious of just*

how he is hindered or helped or otherwise guided by the matrix, but when it is a question of translating his work into another language, the nature of the original matrix manifests itself at once. All his effects have been calculated, or intuitively felt, with reference to the formal 'genius' of his own language; they cannot be carried over without loss or modification.«

Nevertheless, translation does get done, and its possibility is recognized (however grudgingly sometimes) by the original author, by the translator, and by the ultimate receiver. But the possibility of translation hinges upon the separation of the extralinguistic content and its linguistic expression, which means the separation of culture and language. Once it is separated from its original linguistic expression, the particular cultural content (pattern of behaviour, thought, action, institution, artefact) can be fused with other linguistic expressions — within the same language (in intra-lingual translation) or within some other language (in inter-lingual translation).

The necessary precondition for all communication is shared experiential background: paradoxically, while the purpose of communication is the exchange of (new) information, communication can only be about what the communicants already know and share. If their experience of reality is roughly the same, i. e., if they belong to the same culture, communication will proceed smoothly. To the extent that their cultures differ, they will need to reduce the unknown element(s) to the known, thus making sure that they have a common frame of reference. This is precisely what the translator does: he contrasts the source and the target culture to establish how they match, or fail to match. When he finds correspondent patterns of behaviour, institutions, artefacts, etc., he relies on them to ensure successful communication; when he finds none, he resorts to one of the following procedures or their suitable combination to reduce the source-culture elements to the target-culture potential: (a) borrowing,

(b) definition/description, paraphrase, (c) literal translation, (d) substitution, (e) lexical creation, (f) omission (cf. Ivir 1983).

Two comments need to be made in connection with the matched and unmatched elements of culture. First, no matter how closely related they may be, cultures are never identical and the matching is never perfect — bread is not the same thing (and does not even look, smell and taste the same) in French culture and in British culture; beer is not the same thing in British and German cultures; parliament is different in Britain, France and Germany, etc. And these examples have deliberately been taken from areas which are not as culture-specific as some others (for instance, local customs and mores) and from cultures which are so closely related as to be almost one (Western European) culture. When the cultures are more distant, the matching becomes more tenuous: the British National Health Service differs more from the Russian than from the Swedish National Health Service. Second, the choice in the target culture of a correspondent for a particular source-culture item is determined by two considerations: (i) the communicative function of the source-culture item in the original communication, and (ii) the nature of the contrastive relationship between the two languages. Whether a particular unmatched cultural item will be translated by borrowing, definition, literal translation, or substitution, for instance, will depend on whether it happens to be in the focus of communication or merely cultural background. Thus, the American city block will be borrowed and/or defined or described in a text on town planning or patterns of urban living in the United States, but will best be substituted by something like street, neighbourhood, proximity, etc. in a love story. The contrastive relationship between the languages involved plays a major role in the translator's choice of the procedure. For instance, borrowing may be very easy or quite difficult: the morpho-phonemic make-up of some source-language expressions is easily replicated in the target language, where

they fit comfortably and readily undergo various grammatical changes (such as plural formation, declension/conjugation, adjectivization, etc.); other especially multi-word expressions look and sound awkward in the target language and are not easily manipulated. Borrowing tradition also affects the translator's decision: lexical items are borrowed with ease from some languages and with great difficulty from others.

Definition/description may be quite unwieldy and suitable only for footnotes but not for formal use in the text. However, even a clumsy definition may be used in a text if it appears only once; if it is to be frequently repeated, it needs to be replaced by a more compact (borrowed, invented, literally translated) expression. Literal translation may appear rather attractive, but it also brings problems of its own: some literal translations are no more transparent than their untranslated originals, others are unwieldy and begin to look more like definitions/descriptions, while still others are transparent and natural but con-

vey meanings other than those desired. The choice of substitution raises issues of another kind. Since it means matching unmatched items from two different cultures, it wipes out cultural differences and suggests identity where there is none. When this is done (as it normally is) for cultural items which are not in the focus of communication but are »merely« background information, the cultural flavour of the original is lost and what we get is no particular cultural flavour at all or the flavour of the target culture. If substitution is used for items in the focus of communication, the result is mistranslation. Lexical creation means enriching the target language at the same time that the target culture is enriched. Finally, omission — though it may sound heretical — is legitimate in the case of items supplying background information whose preservation would entail greater communicative hindrance than cultural gain.

All of the above comments have been made on the assumption that there is some extralinguistic content

which is separable from its linguistic expression and which can therefore accept the linguistic expression of another language. They do not hold for cases where language itself is culture — where the communicated cultural content is about the source language: for instance, demonstrating that particular words rhyme in that language, that they make assonances or alliterations, that particular cadences or rhythms characterize the linguistic expression, that particular puns or other forms of word play are possible, etc. There are no prescribed procedures for the translation of what might be called linguistic culture as there are for non-linguistic culture. There is only re-creation within the limits of the translator's ability to exploit the resources of the target language and to capture the characteristics of its linguistic culture. The linguistic culture of the source language is not reproduced in any sense in this case, since it only provides a stimulus for the translator to seek a match for it in the linguistic culture of the target language.

