

APPROACHING CULTURAL RELATIONS FOR TRANSLATION PURPOSES

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Introduction

'Raising cultural awareness', 'translating across cultures' or 'cultural proficiency' have become common words in translating and interpreting. The concept of **culture** has constituted recently the main subject of many translation books and scientific articles (Tannen 1985; Triandis 1994; Hatim and Mason 1997; Katan 2004; Croitoru 2006, 2008). Likewise, the concept of **intercultural communication** (the process of exchanging meaningful and unambiguous information across cultural boundaries, in a way that preserves mutual respect and minimises antagonism – Wikipedia) has become a key concept in everyday communication practices and especially in translation or interpreting. According to the *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, communication needs to be "... as constructive as possible, without misunderstandings and breakdowns. It is our belief that research on the nature of linguistic and cultural similarities and differences here can play a positive and constructive role." (<http://www.immi.se/intercultural/>).

This paper complements my research in the fields of source text analysis for translation (Dejica 2006, 2009c) and translation processes (Dejica 2008, 2009a), and presents a suggested methodology for approaching cultural elements and relations in pragmatic texts. The overview in the first part shows how the concepts of culture and translation are intertwined; the second part presents the cultural peculiarities which are most likely to occur in pragmatic texts. The methodology for approaching such elements and relations is presented in the third part and exemplified in the fourth.

1. Culture and translation: an overview

Understanding the concept of 'culture' and identifying cultural relations are essential in coping with cultural similarities and differences in text. A metaphorical definition of the concept starting from its literal meaning is given by Katan (2004), who explains that

The word comes from the Latin *cultus*, 'cultivation', and *colere* 'to till'. The metaphorical extension is apt. Seeds continually absorb elements from the land, or rather the ecosystem, to ensure their development. In the same way, people continually absorb vital elements from their immediate environment that influence their development within the human system. (Katan 2004: 26)

As early as 1871, the English anthropologist Edward Barnett Tylor formulated what proved to be one of the most quoted definitions of culture (1871/1976: 1), used by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or by Sapir (1994: 35) to introduce the topic: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".

By 1952, American anthropologists Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn had compiled a list of 164 definitions of the concept. Their own lengthy definition was as follows:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning elements of future action. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 181)

More recently, in 1994, American psychologist Triandis defined culture as follows:

Culture is a set of human-made objective and subjective elements that in the past have increased the probability of survival and resulted in satisfactions for the participants in an ecological niche, and thus became shared among those who could communicate with each other because they had a common language and they lived in the same time and space. (Triandis 1994: 22)

According to the 10 volume *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (1994: 2001), “despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature”. This view is confirmed by interculturalists such as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997: 21) who admit that “in twenty years we have seldom encountered two or more groups of individuals with identical suggestions regarding the concept of culture”.

In my approach to translation, I see translators as mediators who are working with different languages and who invariably, just as seeds, continually absorb elements from different cultures. Such elements may be in the form of implicit or explicit patterns (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 181) which need to be shared and understood so as communication through a common language is ensured (Triandis 1994: 22). I partially overlap thus the role of the translator with the role of the cultural mediator, who has been defined by Taft (1981) as

a person who facilitates communication, understanding and action between persons or groups who differ with respect to language and culture. The role of the mediator is performed by interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions, and expectations of each cultural group to the other, that is, by establishing and balancing the communication between them. In order to serve as a link in this sense, the mediator must be able to participate to some extent in both cultures. Thus a mediator must be to a certain extent bicultural. (Taft 1981: 53)

Taft (1981: 73) posits that a mediator must possess a series of competences in both cultures, which are summarized in what follows:

- **Knowledge about society:** history, folklore, traditions, customs; values, prohibitions; the natural environment and its importance; neighbouring people, important people of the society, etc;
- **Communication skills:** written, spoken, non-verbal;
- **Technical skills:** those required by the mediator’s status, e.g., computer literacy, appropriate dress, etc;
- **Social skills:** knowledge of rules that govern social relations in society and emotional competence, e.g., the appropriate level of self-control.

From this definition and overview, a cultural mediator is more than a translator, translating being just one of the skills among other skills s/he would need. Hatim and Mason (1997: 128) also use the term mediation suggesting that “the notion of mediation is a useful way of looking at translators decisions regarding the transfer of intertextual reference”. According to them (1997: 223-224), “[T]he translator is first and foremost a mediator between two parties for whom mutual communication might otherwise be problematic and this is true of the translator of patents, contracts, verse or fiction just as much as it is of the

simultaneous interpreter, who can be seen to be mediating in a very direct way". Hatim and Mason conclude with two specific ways in which a translator is a mediator:

- **bi-cultural vision:** the translator is uniquely placed to identify and resolve the disparity between sign and value across cultures.
- **critical reader:** the translator is a 'privileged reader' of the Source Language text. S/he will have the opportunity to read the text carefully before translating it and therefore is in a position to help the target reader by producing as clear a text as the context would warrant.

Similar views are shared by Vermeer (1987), who described the translator as *bi-cultural*, Mary Snell-Hornby (1992), for whom the translator is a *cross-cultural specialist*, or Hewson and Martin (1991), who talk of *the Translation Operator as a Cultural Operator*.

2. Identification of cultural elements for translation purposes

At this point I am interested in finding an answer with regard to precisely *what* is mediated by a translator from a cultural perspective. Also, of particular interest in establishing cultural relations in a suggested holistic analysis is to identify the particular elements of a culture which may occur in texts as information universe constituents. An answer comes from Taft (1981: 73) who sees such elements as constituents of society: history, folklore, traditions, customs; values, prohibitions; the natural environment and its importance; neighbouring people, important people of the society, etc.

Another answer comes from Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) whose interpretation of culture resides in a model comprising three concentric rings or *layers of culture* (1997: 21-22):

- **the outer layer:** artefacts and products;
- **the middle layer:** norms and values;
- **the core:** basic assumptions.

Examples of artefacts and products include the organization of institutions, such as the legal system and bureaucracy. Norms relate to social rules of conduct while values are aspirations which may never actually be achieved. The core, in Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner model, is the heart of culture and the most inaccessible. It contains basic assumptions about life which have been handed down unconsciously from generation to generation.

A similar approach comes from Hofstede (1991: 7), who uses the metaphor *skins of an onion* to refer to different levels of culture. Hofstede's levels of culture include **symbols, heroes, rituals, and values**:

- **symbols:** semiotic signs recognized as belonging to a particular group such as words, gestures, pictures, objects, dresses, etc. All in all, a symbol is any perceivable sign that communicates a meaning.
- **heroes:** a particular cultural belief in a superhero, e.g., an outsider who single-handedly defeats evil in society, i.e., Rambo, Superman, Dirty Harry, etc.
- **rituals:** 'ice-breaking' ritual or introductory rapport-building chat in professional communication, weather-routines in England, etc.
- **values:** the core of culture which is invisible, as opposed to *symbols, heroes, and rituals* which are visible.

As early as 1950's, Hall used the Iceberg Theory to explain that the most important part of culture is completely hidden, and what can be seen is *just the tip of the iceberg* (1952, 1990: 43). The same theory has also been used by Brake et al. (1995) who suggest a division as follows:

Laws, customs, rituals, gestures, ways of dressing, food and drink and methods of greeting, and saying goodbye. They are all part of culture, but they are just the tip of the iceberg [...] The most powerful elements of culture are those which lie beneath the surface of everyday interaction. We call these value orientations. Value orientations are preferences for certain outcomes over others. (Brake et al. 1995: 34-39)

These orientations as seen by Brake et al. are shown below:

- **technical:** language – music, art, food and drink, dress, architecture, institutions, visible behaviour;
- **formal:** appropriacy – rituals, customs, ways/styles of discourse, dress, etc.
- **informal:** orientations – action, communication, environment, time, space, power, individualism, competitiveness, structure, thinking.

From this overview I summarize the following cultural elements which I believe are most likely to occur in pragmatic texts and which need holistic analyses as far as their understanding is concerned: institutions, heroes or popular figures, ways of dressing, food and drink, music, art, or architecture. These cultural elements may be present in the source text in various lexical forms such as terms, neologisms, proper names, idiomatic expressions, multiword expressions, etc. I resume my initial position according to which the holistic analysis follows and complements the atomistic and hol-atomistic analyses in the process of text understanding (Dejica 2008).

3. Approaching cultural elements and relations for translation: a suggested methodology

Various cultural elements are summarized in the previous section. The relations that can be drawn during the holistic analysis between a cultural information universe (IU) constituent of a text (see below) and the cultural context of the language in which it appeared (the cultural context is an information universe in itself) are named in my approach *cultural relations*. I consider that clarification of such cultural relations facilitates text understanding and is a pre-requisite for felicitous translation.

I see translation as **an activity which transfers into a target text – with a specific purpose in mind – the writer's intention expressed in a source text**. All the constituents expressed in the source text and taken individually or relationally form what I call the **information universe** of the text. I use the term 'universe' from science, where it stands for the sum of everything that exists in the cosmos. Just like in science, in my approach, universe stands for the sum of all the information that exists in a text. The IU constituents are carriers of information which structurally can be divided into a two-part information system, which in my approach is formed of Themes and Rhemes. I use 'transfer' with a double connotation: the one found in Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997) and Hatim and Munday (2004), to imply that I see translation as process, and the one found in Nida and Taber (1969) and Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2005) to refer to the second stage of the translation process, i.e., that of transfer, where the analysed 'material' is transferred into the mind of the translator and compared for translation purposes. Reception, transfer and reproduction are the three stages of translation on which the following methodology for approaching cultural relations is based.

I see the analysis of cultural relations for translation purposes as a multi-step process combining pragmatic identification of information (Dejica 2006) and atomistic and holistic analyses (Dejica 2008, 2009a); the analysis consists of the following steps which are suggested to be performed during the three stages of translation previously mentioned:

- a. Identification of information universe (IU) elements using a suggested pragmatic Theme-Rheme (PTR) model (Dejica 2009a) – reception;
- b. Atomistic analysis of IU constituents (Dejica 2008) – reception;
- c. Holistic analysis by establishing possible cultural relations between the IU elements and auxiliary IUs (Fig. 3.1) – reception;

The holistic analysis can be illustrated as follows:

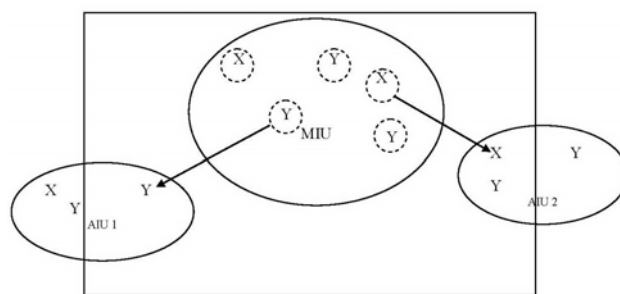


Fig. 3.1 Representation of cultural relations in the Extended Information Universe (ST)

where

- X and Y are IU constituents in the form of Themes and Rhemes
- the arrows represent possible cultural relations between the IU constituents and other constituents from auxiliary IUs.
- MIU is the Main Information Universe of the text to be translated, with all its constituent Themes and Rhemes;
- AIU are Auxiliary Information Universes containing extended knowledge needed for text understanding;
- EIU, or the Extended Information Universe, is the complete image of all the constituents expressed in the source text and of their relations with other constituents of different auxiliary information universes.

As Fig. 3.1 shows, not all of the IU constituents form the main IU require cultural explicitness; furthermore, I assume there may be pragmatic texts where such relations may be inexistent.

- d. Identification of possible cultural relations specific to the target language and target culture (Fig. 3.2) – transfer; I see this step as a reversed process: if in the source text analysis, the identification of the cultural holistic relations is done in a bottom-up manner, starting from the source text cultural element and ending with its fixation in the source culture, in the transfer stage, I understand it as a top-down process, starting with the identification of a specific cultural element in the target culture and ending with its transfer in the target text. The translator basically checks (1) whether the target language has already ‘absorbed’ the cultural relations (Hofstede 1991) existent in the source text, and (2) whether there are any other relevant existent cultural relations in the target culture which may have a similar impact for the target audience as the ones in the source text.

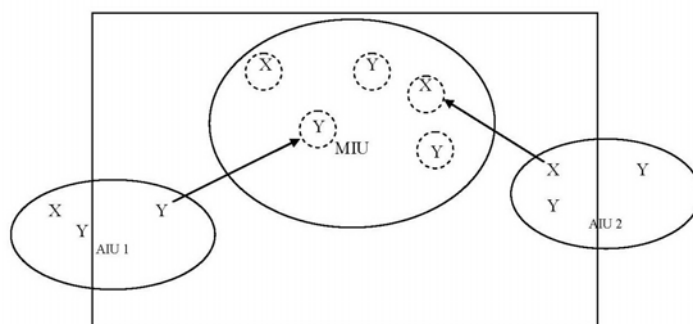


Fig. 3.2 Representation of cultural relations in the Extended Information Universe (TT)

- e. Strategy-based transfer into the target text – transfer; based on his/her findings, the translator chooses now the most appropriate translation strategy which s/he will use in the next and final step: for instance, in case the target language has not

absorbed a cultural element, s/he may resort to radical changes typical of localization (Esselink 2000) or domestication (Venuti 1998).

- f. Translation proper – reproduction; application of the selected strategy.

For the exemplification of this methodological approach I shall use the Ptolemy Project example on which a series of atomistic and hol-atomistic analyses have already been performed (Dejica 2006, 2009b). That is why only the results of these analyses will be resumed here (steps **a** and **b** of the suggested methodology):

4. Ptolemy Project Objectives

The project aims to develop techniques supporting heterogeneous modeling, including both formal "meta-models" and a software laboratory for experimenting with heterogeneous modeling. In this context, it will explore methods based on dataflow and process networks, discrete-event systems, synchronous/reactive languages, finite-state machines, and communicating sequential processes. It will make contributions ranging from fundamental semantics to synthesis of embedded software and custom hardware. (Ptolemy Project, <http://ptolemy.eecs.berkeley.edu/>)

- a. Identification of IU elements; the Themes and the Rhemes identified using the PTR model (Dejica 2009a: 65) are exemplified below:
 1. **Theme** – given information: '*Ptolemy project*'
 2. **Rhemes** – new information (i.e. the objectives proper): 'development of techniques supporting heterogeneous modeling, including both formal "meta-models" and a software laboratory for experimenting with heterogeneous modeling; exploration of methods based on dataflow and process networks, discrete-event systems, synchronous/reactive languages, finite-state machines, and communicating sequential processes; making contributions ranging from fundamental semantics to synthesis of embedded software and custom hardware.'
- b. the atomistic analysis of the IU constituents (Dejica 2009a: 81) shows that the text is rich in terms, multiword terminological expressions and neologisms, and at first sight, it might appear that text understanding is complete;
- c. however, the holistic analysis shows that the author's choice in using *Ptolemy* in the title for the name of the project was not hazardous: Ptolemy was an ancient Roman (of Hellenistic ethnicity) mathematician, geographer, astronomer, and astrologer, whose scientific treaties revolutionized the ancient world and are still of interest even in modern times. The holistic analysis of this particular cultural relation makes it possible for the translator to draw a parallel between Ptolemy as a cultural element in the Ancient World and the Ptolemy Project objectives and to understand the intention of the author, i.e., that of showing that the techniques developed by the project (and eventually the project itself) are also intended to be revolutionary;
- d. if the language pair of the translator is English-Romanian, the translator may consider keeping 'Ptolemy' in the target text for a Romanian audience, since Ptolemy is a landmark of the European culture and will most likely trigger the same effects in the mind of the educated Romanian audience as it did for the English audience. However if the language pair is English-Chinese, the translator may also consider replacing 'Ptolemy' with 'Zhang Heng', a famous Chinese astronomer, geographer, and mathematician (78-139 A.D.), who, among other things, constructed a celestial globe and is a cultural landmark in China, as Ptolemy in Europe;

- e. perfect equivalence, borrowing, radical change, e.g. *Ptolemeu*, *Ptolemy*, *Zhang Heng*, are some of the translation strategies the translator may use to transfer the cultural element in the target language;
- f. application of the selected translation strategy, e.g. *Proiectul Ptolemeu*.

Conclusions

The methodology presented in this paper is mainly aimed at the translator of pragmatic texts who, in a globalized world, is continually faced with a multitude of cultural challenges. Understanding and being able to approach them is a prerequisite and a key to felicitous translation. The methodology can also be used as didactic material in translation classes.

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