

# The Quest for Culture in Translation. From Then to Now

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## Abstract

*This article aims to illustrate the undeniable interplay between culture and translation, and it attempts to explore the cultural impact on literary translation. As translation has always served a special purpose or many purposes at the same time, each time it has been shaped by a certain force, power, or ideology. Approaching a culture implies beginning a process of translation which reveals the power one culture can exert over another. Furthermore, the article is intended to contribute to strengthening the bond between literary translation and culture, as translation is not the production of a text equivalent to another text, but rather a complex process of rewriting the original which runs parallel both to the overall view of the language, and to the influences and the balance of power that exists between one culture and another.*

**Keywords:** *translation, culture, literary translation*

## 1. Introduction

*Culture [is] those deep, common, unstated experiences which members of a given culture share, which they communicate without knowing, and which form the backdrop against which all other events are judged. (Edward T. Hall, 1959: X)*

Starting from the statement above, the language of a society or of a community (at the nation level), cannot be studied only by analysing the language itself or the process of communication. There are indeed structures that help people get at the deep level in understanding a community more than language. This is why culture can be identified with one of these structures. Language itself comes as an expression of individuality and culture, influencing the speakers' perception of the world. Furthermore, the invisible bond between translation and culture is

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the one which opens the gate to cultural variety, as every culture flourishes when interacting with another one.

Translation is an influential process. Thus, we should be aware of the fact that if culture is to be found in a text, then language is to be found in culture. Translators should be familiar with everything that defines culture, that is: customs, traditions, social backgrounds and norms, or styles of speaking. Moreover, considering the act of translation as taking place in a socio-cultural environment, it is of utmost importance to judge it within a social context.

## **2. Towards a working definition of the multi-layered concept of culture**

The fundamental yet the very general concept of *culture* may be defined as the total way of life of a people, together with their learned behavioural patterns, or norms, or values. Towards an articulated view and a salient definition of culture, we shall start the discussion from a collection of seminal definitions advanced by scholars.

It is widely acknowledged that Boas' concept of *culture* revolutionized anthropology and not only its holistic and dynamic nature. In *The Methods of Ethnology* (1920), Boas rejects the mere enumeration of standardized beliefs and customs of a tribe in favour of the individual responses to the whole social environment, highlighting the behavioural changes that occur in a society due to individual agency. He pleads for a dialectical relationship between individual actions and the social environment while culture becomes signifying practice.

Further on, in his programmatic book *Primitive Culture*, Taylor (1924 [1871]) identifies culture to civilization in the Enlightenment framework, and eventually, civilization to commonality:

*Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.* (Taylor 1924 [1871]: 1)

Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology, forcefully points to the idea that culture should be understood as an aggregate of social facts, superseding the individual:

*... they consist in manners of acting, thinking and feeling, exterior to the individual, having an existence over and above the individual and they are endowed with the power of coercion by which they impose themselves on the individual.* (Durkheim, 1937 [1895]: 5)



Huxley (1942) defines *culture* as an integrated system of „mentifacts” (ideology), „artifacts” (material objects) and „sociofacts” (behaviour). In the same climate of opinion, Wittgenstein postulates that, „The limits of my language are the limits of my world” (1958: 53). We should understand that, in fact, language, as the main part of the cultural core, is at the heart of culture. Narrative or poetry, songs or plays, are not only soft expressions of a culture but also faces of culture while languages are to be defined as systems of symbols, either spoken or written.

Hall (1959) draws attention to culture as a hidden control force that has the major role of shaping human existence. The author provides an enlarged definition in which he rejects the exotic nature of culture in favour of a more inclusive matrix:

*Culture is not an exotic notion studied by a select group of anthropologists in the South Seas. It is a mold in which we are all cast, and it controls our lives in many unsuspected ways.* (Hall, 1959: 52)

Being a rather complex series of interrelated activities with origins deeply buried in our past, culture is, in its entirety, a form of communication. In a living, dynamic circle, it governs communication, whereas the latter creates, reinforces, and re-creates culture.

### **3. Translation and culture**

The twentieth century has been labelled, undoubtedly, the age of translation. Whereas in the nineteenth century translation was mainly a one-way means of communication between prominent men of letters and, to a lesser degree, philosophers and scientists and their educated readers abroad. The setting up of a new inter-national body, the constitution of an independent state, the establishment of a multinational company etc. give translation enhanced socio-political importance. Due to the exponential increase in technology (i.e. patents, specifications, documentation), the attempt to bring it to developing countries, the simultaneous publication of the same book in various languages, or the increasing need of communication, has correspondingly increased requirements. Considering the fact that a culture is the reflection of a language, then a translation becomes a cross-cultural experience mirrored through a linguistic filter.

Showing an anthropologic starting point, Snell-Hornby (1988: 46) pleads for the fact that translation does not occur between languages, but between cultures. Therefore, the translator is not only bilingual, but also bicultural. The idea is also put forward (among other historically linguistic approaches) by Nord (1991), who conceptualises translation as a two-



sided intercultural communication process: first comes the production of the source text in a source communicative situation and, next, the production of the target text in a target communicative situation (Nord 1991: 7).

Despite their linguistic orientation, authors such as Hatim and Mason (1990), Bell (1991) and Baker (1992) underline that without taking into consideration the cultural factor, the context in which any text is either translated or received would definitely remain incomplete.

Following the same line, but from a descriptivist perspective, Toury (1995: 56) defines *translation* as an activity which deals with two languages at least, i.e. with two sets of norms implied by each level of understanding. Guided by the same beliefs, Hermans suggests that translation operates on existing discourses:

*... while fashioning new texts after models belonging to other discourses, individual cultures or groups may develop different attitudes with regard to these potentially disruptive new arrivals.* (Hermans 1999: 89)

It may seem, thus, that the concept of *culture* is of utmost importance to translation, while translation practice represents an undeniable interaction between cultures. An interaction with successful acclaims only if the original purpose is achieved within the target context.

#### **4. Literary translation and the cultural load**

Of all types of translations, it is actually considered that literary translation allows us to share the creative process of translation (Landers 2001: 4-5). According to Bush (1998: 127), literary translation is „an original subjective activity at the center of a complex network of social and cultural practices”. Not to mention the fact that this complex process of translation may differ from translator to translator, being also influenced by the particular work to be translated.

Newmark (1998: 117) puts forward the idea that the first thing a literary translator deals with are words set on a page by an author „who may be dead physically or metaphorically and now lives in the variegated readings by a host of readers of the source language”. Then, it is the literary translator’s mission to overcome the gap between accuracy and elegance by making wise choices regarding not only the linguistic individuality of the source language author, but also the particular features of normal usage in the target language. There is that point of cultural convergence and that particular feeling in the source culture which translators should bridge. It is also Newmark (1998: 201) who deems that it is a must for



literary language to remain aesthetically pleasing in translation, all together with that constant tension between the informative and aesthetic function of language.

Lambert (1998: 132) advocates that literary translation should be regarded as a goal-oriented activity aiming to fulfill a need in the target literary culture, „an analysis of these needs and the strategies employed to address them may help us explain the dynamics of literary relationships and traditions, and hence of literary translation”. He also pleads for the necessity of considering of great importance the influence that translated works have on shaping communication, the dynamics of discourse and, last but not least, culture.

Also highlighting that „most cultures have only a limited tradition of translation criticism and theory but there is generally an obvious systematic in their implicit discourse on translation” (Lambert 1998: 132), the scholar points to the invisible network of relationships between translators and translated texts, the readers and the critics, drawing the conclusions that literary translation is made up of the study of norms, models and traditions.

## 5. Conclusions

The act of translation is timeless, change in translation is unavoidable, whereas the cultural factors in the process of translation are reflected through the translation itself. Literary translation and cultural-related items are linked, as the cultural context is indeed re-constructed in another language. The acid test that this reshaping must pass comes from the language level, the cultural level and the reader’s acceptance level. In this regard, translation opens a new history of a text, this time in a new body/shape and a new culture.

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