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## **The Cultural Aspect of Translation**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Translation is an interdisciplinary practice with texts of different types and properties. However, the role that translation has played through the course of time has enabled cultures and societies to communicate and convey knowledge but still the Arabic text is mis-translated in the European societies. Due to its importance ideologically and conceptually, it is important for the translator to acquaint him\herself with appropriate information regarding culture and how it is realized in translation. The following paper tries to approach the issue of culture in translation by trying to define it and then tackles different approaches regarding culture and the translation theory. It then moves to present some views on the cultural component when translating. Through these discussions and opinions, the researchers of this paper hope to make readers gain a better understanding of culture and its importance when translating.

## **1. Introduction**

Through translation, cultures and societies can communicate. It is the medium through which people, cultures and societies can express themselves and preserve their intellectual products. According to Muñoz Calvo & Buesa Gómez (2010), what is important to note in this regard is the fact that the world has changed and is still continuously changing. Thus, translation cannot escape two main effects; the first one is that of the identity of the culture and the second is that of the world becoming homogenized (i.e. globalization). Furthermore, translation is responsible for preserving the identity of the culture by conveying and transforming it by means of language transfer. In other words, cultures and their literary, scientific, artistic, etc. texts become accessible by translation.

According to Toury (1978) translation is that activity “which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions.” (p.200). This implies that translators are always challenged with the issue of dealing with the cultural traits in the source text (ST) and then searching and matching those traits using the best fitting way for transforming or conveying such traits to the target language (TL). There are several aspects regarding how culture affects the content of texts. This ranges from the words used (the lexical content of texts) to how the words are arranged or related to each other (the syntactic aspect) to even the ideas, norms or ways of life (the ideologies) of the source culture. What is more, translators are the arbiters with regard to the importance given to some cultural traits than others in addition to their necessity to the target language (TL).

## **2. Defining Culture**

The concept culture is a very familiar one but still very illusive at the same time. The reason it is so is the fact that defining it is quite problematic. In other words, anyone can understand and practice the term, but many would find it difficult to define it. Still, understanding that concept with its implications is part and parcel of social sciences whether in practice or theory and translation is no difference. A look at a couple of general definitions would illustrate how complicated the term is, but they will shed light on some properties relating to it, which will aid in understanding and thus defining it.



The online Merriam-Webster<sup>1</sup> dictionary defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group”. Tyler (1870 cited by Avruch, 1998: 6) delineates the concept as “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.’ Consequently, some shared words can be inferred from such definitions as “customs”, “beliefs”, “norms”, “knowledge” and the interrelations or interactions between them. However, it is also important to note here how the Tyler’s definition mystifies culture or complicates the term by referring to it as a “complex whole”.

Consequently, one key property of culture is its comprehensive and inclusive nature and the fact that it is made out of many other elements taken for granted. In another perspective, Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952:181, cited by Adler, 1997: 14) defines the term saying that:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; 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, as conditional elements of future action.

The second definition also hints at how broad and detailed the concept is. Furthermore, it can be seen that the concept is dynamic as it implies an interaction and interrelationship between its components. culture, as it was noted above, is not easy to define but its effect can be found in any linguistic production regardless what the language is.

Whether language is part of culture or not is a debatable issue. For example, Newmark (1988) approaches the definition keeping in mind the relationship between language and culture saying that it is “the way of life and its manifestations that are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>



peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (p. 94). However, Newmark (1988) separates language from culture when saying that language is not "a component or feature of culture" (p.95); this is in contrast to Vermeer (1989) who said that "language is part of a culture" (p. 222).

Even though there are different opinions with regard to whether language is part of culture or not, culture remains fundamental to be considered when translating. Nida (1964), for example, equates the importance of culture and language in translation when saying that "differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure" (p. 130). In a similar fashion, Bassnett (1980) views culture and language as being related to each other since language is "the heart within the body of culture" (p.13-14) and that the linguistic aspect of texts is only one part of the picture since "a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria" should be taken into consideration (ibid). In relation to what has been just mentioned, both language and culture seems to be inseparable and should be taken into account when translating.

### **3. Culture and Translation Theory**

To Sánchez Trigo (2001), a central goal of a theory of translation is the analysis and scrutiny of all kinds of translation which changes the focus from an emphasis on the product of translation to the intercultural interference. In other words, like the case within a purely scientific field of knowledge, a translation theory should possess the capacity to account for and anticipate in a systematic way all translation phenomena. Hurtado Albir (2011) sees that the use of translation entails the act of providing those who do not have the knowledge or information about the language and culture of a text with the needed information of how the text was made or composed. In this respect, translators can be regarded as 'middlemen' or those who mediate the source language and culture to the target community, or those who can give people a cultural or textual access. What's more, translators are ought to be in full knowledge regarding the audience they are translating to and the purpose of the translation.

Newmark (1988) sees that a translation theory should not be concerned with current problems, but rather it should be concerned with types of translations and with the communicative and semantic aspect of translation. In this context, Newmark (1988)



lists different types of translations such as information translation, plain prose translation, interlinear translation, and academic translation. The first type – information translation - is concerned with briefly covering of abstracts to a complete production of content. On the other hand, the second type – plain prose translation – is a familiar-language translation in contrast to interlinear translation which is concerned with the mechanism underlying the original text. Newmark (1988) goes on to say that communicative translation tackles the reader of the translation product; hence, it should be expected to transfer some elements found in the target culture. communicative translation is basically concerned with the context of the translation whether where it initiates in the source culture and how it is embodied in the target culture. In other words, it deals with how the context affects the meaning of text being translated.

When many researchers approach the translation theory socially, communicatively or linguistically, Eugene (2012) adds the factor of the translator. According to Eugene (2012), the translator occupies a central status in the translation process for the fact that the translator is one who performs the translation process. Hence, a complete knowledge of the source language and that of the target must be present in the schemata of the translator. What's more, she/he has to be acquainted with the theme and interior of the text and has to deal with the style encoded in the source language (Eugene, 2012). Eugene (2012) points at is that the translator should not be viewed objectively because he/she is part of the translation process and hence there must be found a subjective or personal element.

The role that the translator satisfies has significantly changed due to changes in how translation is perceived. For example, first translators used to be quite ardent about staying faithful to the original text by translating words for words without paying attention to either the cultural or the grammatical context of the text. Hence, for translators, it was not quite important for them to have a complete understanding of the cultural or linguistic aspect of the target text. Their main concern was only structural in that they would only be paying attention to that aspect between the two texts. However, with the course of time, new perspectives concerning translations started to emerge, and with this emergence, the role of the translator started to change to becoming more concerned with the cultural aspect of texts. This appears

quite important due to the pivotal role that culture plays in language coding or decoding.

#### **4. Culture and the Translation**

People, cultures and societies go through some instances of misunderstanding and this part and parcel of life (Rabassa, 1996). This is quite true since life is reflected through our understanding which is transmitted through language that is culturally-bound. In other words, different language systems have different ways of perceiving, processing and producing information. Still, language is not the sole reason for this understanding since there is a role that culture plays in this issue. According to Faiq (2004:1), points to the issue that this misunderstanding occurs in some specific context whether they are cultural or social which are then being conveyed by language. Hatim (1997) mentioned the idea that cross-cultural misunderstanding or miscommunication mostly originates from communication mistakes arising from not fully comprehending a group of concepts or ideas adopted by a specific group of people (p.157). Hence, it becomes quite important to familiarize oneself with some accounts regarding cultural translation.

Newmark (1988) distinguishes between transference and componential analysis (p. 96) as two different techniques when dealing with cultural words. The first method - transference - is related to giving "local colour" while maintaining cultural concepts and names whereas the second described by Newmark as "the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message" (p. 96). However, this could lead to subversive translation as it shall be noted later in this paper.

On the other hand, one could also consider the delineations of formal and dynamic equivalence proposed by Nida (1964:129) when referring to the cultural implications of translation. To Nida (1964), a "gloss translation" most of the time exemplifies formal equivalence where both content and form are produced again as honestly as possible and the reader of the TL has the ability to comprehend "as much as he can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression" of the SL context (p. 129). However, in contrast to the concept of form equivalence, dynamic equivalence attempts to match and link "the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the



context of his own culture" (Nida, 1964:129) irrespective of whether or not he/she could understand the cultural context.

Due to the close connection between culture and language, Faiq (2004:2) suggests that translation studies have generated many views which entail that translation has to be held as a cultural act or process. Consequently, Nida (2001:82) contends that the term "biculturalism" is far more significant than that of "bilingualism" when dealing with translation since concepts and terms get their conceptual or semantic connotation from the culture where they are used. When saying that concepts get their meanings from their culture, this indicates that there is an ideological element in culturally-bound texts which makes translation, according to Faiq (2004:2), a violent, subversive, manipulative act, and that translation is regarded would contain an element of inappropriation. In a similar fashion, like Faiq (2004), Venuti (1995, 1996 and 1998) also shares the perspective that translation is a violent act. In other words, for Venuti (1996:196), translation involves domestication and foreignization, Venuti (1995) exemplified this idea with the "naturalizing" and "normalizing" impact perpetrated by the Anglo-American translation through covering the voices found in the source text and then only presenting those concepts and values which are specific to the Western communities. As for cultural translation being violent, he argues that it lies in the procedure of reconstructing and adapting the source text in a way to match the ideas, ideologies, values, etc. of the target language (ibid).

The profession of translation is a cultural activity and hence it is affected by many social- and cultural-related variables. As a matter of fact, many translators would have to equip themselves not only with a proper linguistic ability but also with an identity which enables them to understand the cultural context of the text they are dealing with. It can be said that the way a culture or society expresses itself is through language, but the culture is the ground in which language grows; when it comes to translation, it can be viewed as the bridge which mediates intercultural communication.

## **5. Cultural Translation of Arabic Texts**

Cultural translation becomes sensitive and controversial when issues of ideology are brought into focus. These two elements, culture and ideology, can be probed employing the theory of relativism of language in relation to particular cultures (Faiq, 2004:3). Nonetheless, due to being an old and familiar practice, translation as an occupation has always faced the cultural aspect of texts which has made some political and linguistic groups being translated into fully different ones in the target texts when such an aspect is not fully understood or comprehended. (ibid). Venuti (1994), similarly, states that translation is an inescapable domesticating process because the contents of source texts are being adjusted to the language and social standards of the target dialect and can hence be understood inside that particular society. Consequently, Carbonell (2004:27) states that it can be said that translation contains to a large extent a process of adapting in addition to transporting cultures. When put in comparison to each other, both Arabic and English texts are argumentative in nature. However, when the English text follows a more counter-argument style with a more balanced structure following the sequence of “thesis, opposition, substantiation and conclusion (Hatim, 1997: 44, 46-47), the Arabic one prefers a thorough-argumentation style in the sense that modern Arabic texts follow the sequence of “thesis, substantiation and conclusion” (ibid). According to Hatim (1997), counter-argument exists in the Arabic text but in the form of either absolute support or refutation of an idea. Moreover, the Arabic text is often described as full of ambiguous ideas that stem from the issue that ideas receive more symbolic representation since Arabic utterances try to depict emotions or ideas directly which leads to an exaggerated content (Hatim, 1997: 161). Taking into account such characteristics of both Arabic and English texts, how could translators come around this issue?

Restriction of stereotypes is one way the identity of a culture can be rebuilt through translation (Carbonell, 2004, 30. When it comes to the European translation of Arabic texts, Carbonell (2004) voices out dissatisfaction in this regard since the process of translating Arabic texts would follow the path of trying to meet the expectations of the Western readers by domesticating the Arabic culture and its literature for those readers. Similarly, Venuti (1998:83) points at the marginalization of Arabic source





texts by altering them when translating from Arabic in order to appropriate the text into the European cultures. In this way the fidelity of the text is betrayed by the translators in their inaccurate rendering of the source texts.

In line with Venuti, Sara (2004:107) also points that Arabic texts are constructed again (reconstructed) in the target European languages with their ideologically, and traditionally-bound content in order to match the diction and costumes of the target languages. Sara (2004:107-108) continues saying that this rendering of Arabic texts also involves a process of domestication to the extent that all cultural references and voices of the source Arabic language have been completely neglected.

Furthermore, Faiq (2004) points at the manipulation perpetrated on the Arabic texts, which produces a subversive translation, when translating them and this process puts them under the dominance of the European readers to reflect upon them as they want and form all the ideas or views about the Arabic culture and people.

To exemplify the aforementioned idea, Carbonell (2004) mentions the translation of the Arabian Night into Spanish as an illustration regarding foreignization “where for example *al – malik as –sa id* becomes in Spanish *oh rey felz !* (Oh Happy King); although no one would expect a queen to address her husband in such a way” (p.28). This, according to Carbonell, is intended for “the obvious loss of cultural meaning” (p.29). The writer tackles the issue of rebuilding cultural identity by means of introducing the translation footnotes by the translator. For example, “Popular Arabic expressions such as, *waHayaati aynaayka* (rendered literally into Spanish as *por vida de tus ojos* ‘for the life of your eyes’) (Carbonell,2004,p31).

## **6. Conclusion**

The concept culture is a complicated one whether in theory or practice. Consequently, it is vital that translators keep in mind having a proper knowledge of the culture of the text they are dealing with. Still there are different perspectives regarding how culture is viewed in different translation theories. For example, Sánchez Trigo emphasizes the intercultural aspect of translation while Hurtado Albir (2011) highlights the knowledge aspect of texts when translating and he also concentrates on the role of the translators as the ones who can mediate between two cultures. Still, Newmark’s (1988) view is concerned with the communicative function

of cultural translation. And like Hurtado (2011), Eugene (2012) also highlights the role of the translator and that one should not view that role as being objective. For the most part, and taking into account that the world is becoming more open, and that different cultures are getting in touch with each other, a translation theory must foster objectivity and a proper translation of the target culture.

The paper has also tackled different accounts concerning approaching culturally-bound texts. It was noted that Newmark (1988) makes the difference between transference and componential analysis. On the other hand, Nida (1964) makes the difference between formal and dynamic equivalence. It is most appropriate to keep in mind a dynamic-communicative approach when dealing with culturally-bound texts but without forgetting about formal accounts of both languages.

However, cultural translation is not objective all the time as it was noted by Faiq (2004), Nida (2001) and Venuti (1994, 1995, 1996, 1998). It was noted by Faiq (2004) that translation studies suggest that translation is a cultural process indicating that texts do go through a phase of appropriation. For this end, Nida (2001) presented the term “biculturalism” as being more important than “bilingualism” to highlight the importance of transferring two cultures.

The dangers of cultural translation were highlighted by Faiq (2004) saying that such translation contains subversion, manipulation and also appropriation. It was explained that, like Faiq (2004), Venuti (1995, 1996, 1998) also perceives cultural translation as a violent act because it subverts and appropriates source cultural concepts into new ones when transferring them to the target culture. This he referred to as domestication and foreignization. This was seen in the act of translating Arabic texts into the European culture as they go through a process of adaptation and reconstruction as it was noted by Carbnell (2004).

In conclusion, this paper reviewed different perspectives regarding the cultural underpinnings of the translation process. It is important to keep in mind that texts will lose their true nature when they are culturally bound; thus, it is essential to scrutinize the aforementioned perspectives or approaches with the regard to the cultural effect on translation. What is necessary to keep in mind is the amount of



cultural information background which the translator needs to provide in order to achieve an ideal equivalence to the target reader.

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## لایه نی کلتوری وەرگێران

پوخته:

وهرگێران به هۆی مامه له كردن له گه له تیکستی جوړی جیاواز و تایبه تمه نديه كان، راهینانیکی فره بیانه یه. هه رچونیک بیت نه و رۆله ی که به وهرگێران به درێژایی کات ده یگێریت، کلتور و کۆمه لگانی بۆ په یوه نديکردن و گواستنه وه ی زانین به توانا کردوو، چونکه هیشتا ده قی عه ره بی له کۆمه لگا نه وروپیه کاندایه هه له لیکده درێته وه به هۆی گرنگی فیکری و چه مکیه وه گرنگه که وهرگێر خۆی فیری کلتور و چۆنیه تی گه یشتنی به وهرگێران بیت. نه م توێژینه وه یه ی خواره وه هه ول ددهات

بۆ پیناسه کردنی و دواتر ئاراسته کردنی رییازه جیاوازه کان بۆ تیۆری کهلتوور و وهرگیپان له بواری وهرگیپاندا له پرسی رۆشنیبری نزیك بێته وه دواتر ههول دهات بۆ خستنه پرووی چهند بۆچوونیک سه بارهت به پیکهاته کولتوورییه که له کاتی وهرگیپان له رینگه ی ئهم باس و بۆچوونانه وه توێژه رانی ئهم په پیره هیاوازان خوێنه ران له کاتی وهرگیپاندا تیگه یشتنیکی باشتتر له کهلتوور و گرنگییه که ی به دهست بهینن.

### الجانب الثقافي للترجمة

#### الملخص:

الترجمة ممارسة متعددة التخصصات بسبب التعامل مع نصوص من أنواع وخصائص مختلفة. ومع ذلك، فإن الدور الذي لعبته الترجمة عبر الزمن قد مكّن الثقافات والمجتمعات من التواصل ونقل المعرفة، حيث لا يزال النص العربي يُساء ترجمته في المجتمعات الأوروبية. نظرًا لأهميتها أيديولوجيًا ومفاهيميًا، من المهم أن يطلع المترجم نفسه على المعلومات المناسبة المتعلقة بالثقافة وكيفية تحقيقها في الترجمة. يحاول البحث التالي مقارنة مسألة الثقافة في الترجمة من خلال محاولة تعريفها ثم معالجة المناهج المختلفة المتعلقة بالثقافة ونظرية الترجمة. ثم ينتقل لعرض بعض الآراء حول المكون الثقافي عند الترجمة. من خلال هذه المناقشات والآراء، يأمل الباحثون في هذه البحث في جعل القراء يكتسبون فهمًا أفضل للثقافة وأهميتها عند الترجمة.