

**NEGOTIATING TRANSLATION STUDIES: A LEAP FROM LINGUISTIC
DYNAMICS TO CULTURAL DYNAMICS**

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Abstract

The essence of translation is cultural transplanting and mixture than mere linguistic communication. It is easy to find that the involvement of cultural factors in translation processes is permanent when we put translation studies against a cultural background. In recent times, Translation is no longer viewed as a mere transformation of linguistic signs from one language into another. Instead, it is more of a cultural phenomenon. If culture is an active creation in the history of human civilization, one can say that language is the most significant skill acquired since the advent of human beings. Language not only distinguishes man from the other creatures but also makes him the wisest of all creatures. As a part of the cultural whole, language is the medium that carries and transmits other cultural forms. Taking this as backdrop, this paper is an attempt to explore the recent trends in translation Studies in relation to culture.

Translation is more of a cross-cultural communication than a bilingual one. As the cross-cultural transmission of information, it entails a cultural activity in which translators use the reappearance of the source text with the target language with the aim of breaking the language barriers in cultural communication. The essence of translation is cultural transplanting and mixture than mere linguistic communication. It is easy to find that the involvement of cultural factors in translation processes is permanent when we put translation studies against a cultural background. The process of translation is greatly influenced by changing political tendencies, sense of aesthetics, and ethics. The relentless dynamic changes in the field, therefore, cater more to the focus on cultural aspects than on linguistic aspects.

The multi-layered process of translation has traditionally been thought to be a mere linguistic activity performed on texts. Hence it has been mainly defined from the perspective of linguistics with great attention being paid to the comparative study of the source text and the target text. Such cognition renders traditional translation studies a text-oriented endeavour. The finished texts, referring to both the source text and the

target text, thereby become the major objects of translation studies. Under such a condition, critics often tend to adopt a certain translation criterion that includes features such as faithfulness, smoothness, elegance and equivalence (especially the dynamic equivalence of Nida). The translated work is then tested against this framework to determine whether it conforms to the stated requirements or not.

According to Nida, “Translating consists in reproducing the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of language and secondly in terms of style” (Nida, 82). Catford more clearly defined translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language i.e. Source Language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language i.e. Target Language (TL)” (Catford, 107). However, I feel that if translation is conducted from a linguistic perspective, the study often neglects the cultural factors that are crucial determiners of the act of translation. Although situating and analysing the cultural markers pose great limitations, this mode of translation criticism is extremely applicable and effective to achieve a synchronic evaluation of translated texts. Because of the interrelationship between language and culture, translation cannot be separated from culture. Yet in traditional translation studies, little attention is paid to cultural factors, which is inevitably not very scientific. Mary Snell-Hornby (1988/1995:39) observed: It has for centuries been taken for granted that translation merely takes place between languages. This assumption unleashed the word vs. sense debate in traditional theory and lies at the heart of the concept of equivalence.

However, since the 1950s there have been attitudinal changes towards the concerned area. Translation is no longer viewed as a mere transformation of linguistic signs from one language into another. Today, it is more of a cultural phenomenon. “Some translation theorists like Lambert and Robyn, view translation as identical to culture communication, which is conceived not as a static phenomenon but instead as the endless translation of signs into other signs” (quoted, in Gentzler, 1993:186). Susan Bassnett and Lefevere approved her proposal as “momentous”, marking a “cultural turn” for translation study. Earlier, the often enquired questions were “How can translation be taught?” and “How can translation be studied?” ... Now, they have radically changed. The object of study has been redefined; what is studied is the text embedded in its network of both source and target cultural signs and in this way translation study has not only been able to utilize the linguistic approach but also to develop beyond it. (Quoted, in Bassnett & Lefevere: 1998)

The concept of culture is a very comprehensive one including almost every aspect of human life. The famous translation studies expert, Nida defined “Culture [as] the totality of beliefs and practices of a society (Nida79) .Peter Newmark (2001), on the other hand, defines culture as “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a peculiar language as its means of expression”. Another important definition of culture, frequently cited as the classic one, was provided by anthropologist, Edward B. Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871). He defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and many other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Tylor’s definition has continually offered the basis of the most modern anthropological studies

of culture.

If culture is an active creation in the history of human civilization, one can say that language is the most significant skill acquired since the advent of human beings. Language not only distinguishes man from the other creatures but also makes him the wisest of all creatures. As a part of the cultural whole, language is the medium that carries and transmits other cultural forms. Language, completely and co-ordinately reflects the given culture (which in turn is a reflection of the contemporary politics and economics of the concerned society, and is traditionally passed on to the next generation), thereby becoming a carrier that belongs to its own national culture and knowledge.

Modern anthropologists claim that culture is the basis of living and development of human beings. As a matter of fact, society is a complicated cultural system of numerous elements and language is one amongst them. Professor Xing Fuyi proclaims in the preface of his book *Cultural Linguistics*: Language is the symbol of culture, but culture is the channel and orbit of language; just like a mirror or a picture album, different national languages reflect and record the special cultural styles and features of different nations; just like a channel and an orbit, the special cultures of different nations, to some extent, exercise their restraints upon the development of language in different nations.

From this, we can see that study on culture would not be complete without the mention of the relationship between language and culture. As a principal means for people to conduct their social lives, language is an important part of culture. It records the history of human civilization and social progress. Nida too has put forward such an opinion: Language is a part of culture, and in fact, it is the most complex set of habits that any culture exhibits. Language reflects the culture, provides access to the culture, and in many respects constitutes a model of the culture. (Quoted, in Schaeffer & Kelly-Holmes 1995)

Culture is the wealth created by man and different cultures bear respective creators' national, geographic and time's characteristics, thus, inviting a communication between various cultures. This communication is indispensable to translation, because language (oral or written) is the most important carrier. Therefore, differences between various cultures and the necessary communication between them are the causes for the appearance of translation. So, translation is the outcome of cultural communication. As for the research in the field of translation, the most important of all is to understand cultural differences. A translator can't master the languages he is handling if he does not know their inherent cultures. Translators ought to constantly compare the two cultures. It is only through deep, extensive, systematic and specific comparisons that the commonalities and differences of cultures become clear. Thus, the field of translation studies involves the exploration of newer domains.

The mere understanding of the source text in the process of translation is far from being enough. Language is a part of culture and is influenced and restricted by culture. The same word used in different cultural background may well mean differently and different words may well mean the same. Consequently, during the course of translation, the derivation of the right meaning of the source text is to a great extent

determined by the translator's knowledge of the linguistic cultures he is handling. Some scholars are of the opinion that whether a translation is easy or difficult, good or bad is more related to the culture than to the language. The translators' interpolations to the original, an addition or omission, are the results of cultural constraints of a certain period in a certain place. As the aim of translation is to step up cultural communication, some interpolations in the target text are acceptable and sometimes necessary. These interpolations serve to smoothen the cultural communication.

This shift of emphasis which has been called "the cultural turn" in translation studies suggested that a study of the process of translation from cultural perspective could offer a brand-new way of understanding how complex and manipulative textual processes are and the process of selection of a text for translation. What role does the translator play in that selection? What role do editors, publishers or patrons play? What criteria determine the strategies that will be employed by the translator? How might a text be received in the target language system? These questions are pertinent since all translations take place in a continuum, never in a void, and there are all kinds of textual and extra-textual constraints upon the translator. These constraints have changed the course of translation studies. In the past twenty years scholars have come to regard translation as an activity of cross-cultural communication rather than the mere transformation of the signs of different languages. In other words, translation is not only the transformation of linguistic signs but also the communication of thoughts and culture.

The words of one of the Chinese scholars who responded enthusiastically to this "cultural turn" can be read in this regard

Judging the influence and effects of globalization in cultural field from the perspective of culture, we should completely look on human language as a carrier of the transmission of culture. It is an effective experiment to explore translation from the perspective of culture by combining linguistic research, anthropological explanation of culture, and case study of translation works. The eventual aim of this experiment is to achieve the scientific construction of this newly-born, immature and marginal discipline of translation. As has been put previously, in the vast context of globalization, the significance of translation is sure to gain weight, which will surely lead to the redefinition of translation...Hence, translation studies should get rid of the shackles of the linguistic layer, and be put into the broader cross-cultural context so as to get the accomplishments by means of borrowing the methodologies of related disciplines. (Cay Dollerup & Wang Ning: Preface)

Now the academic circles of translation studies have reached a consensus that there has been a shift in translation studies from the mere linguistic transformation to the transference of cultural messages. Thus, while Conacher replaces translation with "inter-cultural communication", Holz-Manttari substitutes "intercultural cooperation" for translation and Snell-Hornby regards it as "a cross-cultural activity". Bassnett and Lefevere claim that it was the 1990s which saw the cultural shift in translation studies

(Gentzler, 1993: 185).

In traditional discussions, the crux of translation, i.e., the items which proved particularly intractable in translation were often described as being “culture-specific” (Trivedi, 2010). Gradually the realization grew that not only were such particular items culture-specific but indeed the whole language was specific to the particular culture it belonged to in some degree or the other. The increased valorization of diversity and plurality in cultural matters also lent strength to this new understanding of language and culture in a way that earlier ideas or ideals of universalism had not.

In fact, translation is in nature a cross-cultural communication rather than a mere handling of languages. As is known to all, language, as a cultural phenomenon and a major carrier of culture, can't survive once separated from the cultural background in which it is deeply rooted. So, translating itself is a process in which cultural intercourse is conducted through the very cultural carrier of language. Every language was born of culture and draws nutrition from it. Therefore, translators should not just concentrate on how to convey the message in one language by the means of another language but should endeavour to display the differences between the two cultural modes of thinking and expression. Thus, in a paradigmatic departure, the translation of a literary text became a transaction not between two languages, but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures. This new awareness was aptly described as “The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies” in the title of a chapter jointly written by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in their book *Translation, History and Culture* (1990). It was precisely the formulation and recognition of this cultural turn in Translation Studies that served to extend and revitalize the discipline and to liberate it from the relatively mechanical tools of analysis available in Linguistics.

There is culture in general, and then there are individual cultures such as Russian, American, British, Chinese, etc. So, there are cultural overlappings and similarities between various cultures, all of which should be taken into consideration in the process of translation. Nida also agrees that culture is more important than language to translation as far as real translation is concerned, Vermeer too has for many years vehemently opposed the view that translation is simply a matter of language; for him translation is primarily a cross-cultural transfer (Vermeer 1986), and in his view the translator should be bicultural, if not pluricultural, which naturally involves a command of various languages, as language is an intrinsic part of culture. (Snell-Hornby 2006).

As far as translation is concerned, it is cultural differences rather than cultural similarities that cause tough difficulties. Mistakes of various kinds often inevitably occur, even if the translator is an experienced one. The way the translator deals with the cultural information contained in the source text is to a great extent decided upon by the cultural environment in which he was brought up. That is, owing to his own cultural stereotype, the author may well distort the cultural information or cannot understand it at all. Whatever the source text, there exists the possibility for us to understand it because of the similarities common to all human beings and this makes translation possible. Even if the source text is easy, it unavoidably contains something elusive, and this makes it necessary for us to know about foreign cultures.

The deep structure of culture is the meanings of tangible behaviors and things. The meaning of the behaviors and things in one culture are universally acknowledged by members of that community, though it may often be implied rather than stated. Meaning is one of the aspects of cultural structures, reflecting the basic view of a people. The translator should try to understand reality according to the view of that people, so as to understand both the implied and stated meanings.

Denial Shaw points out that target readers tend to understand the information in line with their own experiences, rather than the source culture. He advocates domesticating cultural factors in translation. He thinks that one of the tasks for translation is to avoid cultural conflicts, which should be predicted by the translator. Consequently, the translator needs to take sufficient time and energy to settle the potential cultural conflicts. In this way, the target reader can understand what the source text means. Such kind of target-culture-oriented translation relies on the translator's knowledge of the target culture.

Culture in this way, is the totality of beliefs and practices of a society. Once a culture has come into being, it has the characteristics of consistence, duration, and pervasion, and it is embodied in many respects by clothing, social customs pertaining to festivities, burials and taboos, etc. Against different cultural background, people have different modes of thinking, conventions, beliefs, values and attitudes. So, differences between cultures exist naturally and objectively. Thus, various kinds of cultural differences pose various difficulties in the process of smooth and correct translation. And this is the most important part that the author has to explore.

The cultural meaning loaded by one word in the source language can't be expressed by its analogue in the target language. That is, denotations of the two words are the same, but the connotations of them are different, sometimes even contradictory. This is termed as the Conflict of Word Meaning. Although words of this kind don't constitute a large proportion, they can't be neglected in the process of translation. When handling such words or expressions remedial methods such as footnotes or necessary description can be employed so as to succeed in conveying the cultural connotation. It is well known that a message can be totally distorted if the implicit cultural information or a culture-loaded word or an allusion is not well handled by the translator. Cultural discrepancies and local social-cultural constraints, thus, play significant roles. In other words, language is a cultural product, and at the same time culture is also a linguistic product and various text types involve different degrees of cultural connotation.

In addition to the sweeping changes in the socio-political scenario with the progress of civilization, communication among different nations has become more and more frequent. Development of new technology and information systems, changes in the world's population, and a shift in the world's economic arena have made intercultural contact more axiomatic and pervasive. As a result, over the last few decades, two tendencies have become increasingly noticeable in translation studies. One is that translation theories bear a marked brand of culture theories. The other is that more importance is attached to the culturally oriented approach than the linguistically oriented approach. The combination of the two tendencies leads to the

fact that translation is regarded as the communication between different cultures.

Today, domestication and foreignization are the two main translating approaches to cultural conflicts. The school of domestication, represented by Eugene A. Nida, is target-language-oriented. Scholars of this school advocate smooth and transparent versions by domesticating foreign cultures so that the target readers can understand them easily. Nida focusing on the communicative function of translation emphasizes on the equivalence which consists of stylistic equivalence, social-cultural equivalence, and linguistic equivalence (pragmatic equivalence, grammatical equivalence, semantic equivalence) (Nida, 1964). Nida advocates “dynamic equivalence” defined “in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language” (Nida, 1964). Borrowing from the Reception Aesthetics formulated by Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the sixties of the 20th century, Nida lays emphasis on readers’ response. His greatest contribution is that he shifts the focus from the comparison between the original text and the translated version to the comparison between the two communicative processes and takes every linguistic and cultural factor which is possible to affect the reception of information into consideration. And he classifies the equivalence into two levels that are the minimal level of equivalence and the maximal level of equivalence. He regards maximal level of equivalence ideal and thus hard to achieve and minimal level of equivalence fundamental and the basic requirement of translation. A translation that cannot reach the minimal level of equivalence is inadequate. The minimal level is defined as “one in which receptors of the translated text would be able to understand and appreciate it to the point of being able to comprehend how the original receptors must have understood and appreciated the message” (Nida, 1964).

The school of foreignization, on the other hand, is source-language-oriented and these scholars hold that the things unique to foreign cultures should be reserved so as to introduce new expressions into the target language and in effect enrich it. Venuti refers to the traditional fluent strategy prevailing in the circles of western translation as one that seeks an illusion of transparent translation. Since his publication of *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti has been one of the major figures in the circle of contemporary U.S. translation theory. His publications have broken new grounds theoretically, building powerful historical and ideological cases against what he calls the forced “invisibility” or “transparency” of “fluent” or “domesticating” translation and in favor of what he calls the resistant dissidence of “foreignizing” translation. He advocates foreignized translation in order to develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to display the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text. He regards domestication as cultural narcissism and imperialism. And the purpose of foreignization, according to him, is to resist ethnocentrism.

These two strategies can be easily found especially in the translation of literary texts. Domesticating approach means bringing the foreign culture close to the reader of the target culture, making the text recognizable and familiar. Foreignizing approach, on the other hand, means taking the target reader over to the foreign culture, making him

or her see the cultural and linguistic differences. Whereas foreignization is in line with cultural transplanting domestication is the opposite process to cultural transplanting. As far as the form of the translation work is concerned, it is generally admitted that no work of translation is the product of pure domestication or mere foreignization. No matter what attitude the translator adopts towards foreignization and domestication, his translation must be a mixture of domestication and foreignization. No matter how much the target text is domesticated, it should at least reflect the customs and conventions of the alien nationalities. Otherwise, translation cannot be called translation any more.

The disputes between the two schools have been going on and on and neither side seems to have been able to convince the other. Varieties of factors such as the intention of the translator, textual function, socio-cultural environment, historical limitations, the translator's style, etc. play key roles in deciding whether to choose domestication or foreignization strategy. Thus the decision-making process of translation is conditional rather than unconditional. Regarding what to do with translation, Friedrich Schleiermacher, a theologian and philosopher, had offered an answer in an 1813 lecture on the different methods of translation.

Schleiermacher had admitted that translation could never be completely adequate to the foreign text. But the translator can choose between a domesticating method, assimilating the strange factors in the original to those in the target culture, and a foreignizing method, retaining the foreignness of the original. Rather than leaving "the reader in peace as much as possible" and "moving the author towards him," thus naturalizing what is foreign, the translator should, in Schleiermacher's opinion, "leave the author in peace as much as possible," and "move the reader towards him" (quoted, in Venuti, 1995). A translation should therefore read like the original to its target readers so as to discern the working of the source language. In this way, cultural differences can be manifest in the translated text.

Since translation is a temporal production, which is stamped with distinctive historical features, the real value of it should be described and discussed by answering all the questions in detail and should not only be prescribed by one criterion mechanically. Translation studies have been departing from timeless rules and a prescriptive stereotype. Only when these extra-textual factors are taken into consideration can more comprehensive translation studies be made and can the scope of translation be broadened. With the development of society and human civilization, language, culture and translation are all changing continuously. Thus, the target of translation research and methodology should be improved accordingly to meet the needs of our times.

Last but not the least, studying translation from the perspective of cultural communication is just one of the many ways of translation studies. It is not the ultimate solution to every problem concerning translation studies. It is not independent but rather closely related to the other ways of translation studies. Without the development of related disciplines, the construction and development of cross-cultural translation will be fruitless. So, the cultural view on translation is not opposite but supplementary to the other views on translation.

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Bionote

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