

# FROM TRANSLATING CULTURE TO CULTURAL TRANSLATION

What are we doing when we translate? Is there specifically an emphasis on the language itself or are we also abridging a connection between specific cultures or ways of thinking? **Haidee Kotzee** gives an idea of the effects of translation within cultures and the cultures of translation. The gap between cultures is ambiguous and it isn't evident that there are clear distinctions between cultures or that language is just a surface function of a culture. In this article H. Kotzee looks at the epistemological patterns of thought that we maintain in de studies of translation.

## Untranslatability

The notion of 'untranslatability' is enjoying a boom in popularity. Lists of so-called 'untranslatable' words abound: from the Dutch *niksen* and *gezellig*, to the Portuguese *saudade* and the Danish *hygge*, to the Japanese *shinrin-yoku* and *ikigai*. These 'untranslatable' words have also in the past decade become the source of a self-help publishing phenomenon, with slews of books in which the path to happiness and self-fulfilment is conceptually mapped out via cultural Otherness (see, e.g., García & Miralles 2017, Lavrijsen 2020, Wiking 2017).

This popular notion of untranslatability rests on two questionable assumptions, related to the key concepts involved: translation and culture. First, in the popular understanding of translation that informs the notion of '(un)translatability', translation is construed as an equivalence relation between words, and moreover, very specific words, endowed with cultural significance – what may be called shibboleths. In this view, translation is possible if equivalence between words exists. But, as I will show below, 'equivalence' is a far more complex and contested concept, and the aim of translation is not even necessarily equivalence – and certainly not the equivalence of individual words.

The second questionable assumption has to do with the construal of 'culture', which in this popular understanding of untranslatability is mostly seen in essentialist terms: cultures are clearly distinguishable, monolithic entities, characterised by 'essential features', which are also reflected linguistically. This view of cultures has been challenged by scholars across the humanities and social sciences. These arguments highlight that culture is not composed of essences, but is constructed by power and rhetoric, by collections of discursive practices that create cultures as "imaginary communities" (see Anderson 1991). They also emphasise that cultures intersect, are in constant contact, and are internally diversified. Cultures are dynamic – and, moreover, this dynamism is profoundly influenced by power differentials.

Questions about translatability, however, extend beyond these shibboleth cases that capture the popular imagination. The question of (un)translatability is at the heart of translation, as evidenced in the way in which the discipline of Translation Studies (TS) continues to return to the concept (see, e.g., Apter 2013, Hermans 2020, Large et al. 2018). Such arguments about (un)translatability hinge on a theory of language. Steiner (1998/1975) refers to two opposing theoretical perspectives on language: universalist versus monadist views. Universalist views hold that language is merely a surface-level structural expression

of a deeper layer of thought or meaning. This dissociation of form and meaning means that nothing is untranslatable; it is simply a question of finding the 'equivalent' surface structure for the underlying meaning, in a different language. In contrast, the monadist view presupposes that the different linguistic structures of different languages 'impose' a different conceptualisation on the world. It rests on the assumption of a fundamental and reciprocal relationship between language and culture, which would make translation impossible (see also Hermans 2020). In this view, culture is situated not just in shibboleth words, or culture-specific items; rather, language *is* culture, and vice versa.

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Understandably, then, questions of translation, and (un)translatability, have often been the focus of philosophers with an interest in language (see, e.g., Leal & Wilson 2023, Pym 2007, Rawling & Wilson 2019 for overviews). In this essay, however, I do not consider philosophical reflections on translation, in the first instance. Rather, I focus on three ways of considering the relationship between translation and culture, based from *within* the discipline of TS. I first provide an overview of how perspectives on the relationship between *translation and culture* have shifted over the period of roughly half a century that is usually viewed as the scope of TS as a distinct, institutionalised discipline. Subsequently, I raise the question of *cultures of translation*, and consider whether the culture of translation is, itself, something to be questioned. Lastly, I focus on the concept of *cultural translation* as introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. I conclude with a brief reflection on whether increasingly multilingual and multicultural societies, combined with rapid advances in algorithmic translation, destabilise traditional concepts of the relation between translation and culture – and perhaps the notion of 'translation' itself.

### Translation and culture

The disciplinary narrative of TS has been constructed as a series of 'turns', or paradigmatic shifts (see Snell-Hornby 2006) in the study of translation. From an early focus

on micro-level linguistic analysis of translations, the perspective has continued to broaden: first to an analysis of text and discourse, viewed holistically; and beyond, to the functions of translation in different societies and cultures, the intersections between translation and ideology, the roles of networks of people and institutions in shaping translation, and the way in which technology is reshaping the labour of translation.

Of particular interest to the argument here is the so-called 'cultural turn' in TS, a paradigmatic shift in the early 1990s (see Bassnett & Lefevere 1990) that formed part of a larger epistemological change in the social sciences and humanities. The cultural turn in TS involved a focus on the broader social roles of translation, with concepts like ideology and power taking centre stage. In the cultural turn, translation is often seen as a form of re-writing, in which cultural representation is manipulated "in the service of power" (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: vii).

The cultural turn in TS fundamentally altered the questions the discipline asked about the translation of culture. No longer principally interested in whether the cultural connotations of a word (or a text, or a stretch of discourse) *could* be adequately translated (in other words, whether 'equivalence' could be attained), it instead asked what translational choices reveal about power dynamics in societies and cultures. The focus shifted from words (or texts) to cultures as the unit of analysis (see also Trivedi 2007). Furthermore, the focus was no longer chiefly on the relation between the original text and the translation, evaluated in terms of 'equivalence'. Instead, it is assumed that the receiving culture deems the translation 'equivalent', and the important question is then what these perceived or assumed equivalences reveal about relations and power dynamics between and within societies, languages and cultures.

The cultural turn also involved an emphasis on issues of ethics in translation. However, as Pym (2007: 37) argues, the demise of equivalence as an ideal meant that the ethics of translation was no longer (only) seen in terms of the relation between the original text and the translation (a question of fidelity or faithfulness), but rather as (also) focused on the "texture of human relationships". What roles does translation play in maintaining or challenging social inequalities of various kinds?

### Cultures of translation

The cultural turn in TS gave rise to a focus on translational choice-making and the motivations for such choices. Translational choice-making refers not only to the choices made by a translator during a translation, but also to the decisions of institutions (like publishers) about what is (and is not) translated, in the first instance. Taken together, such analyses >>



produce a sketch of what could be called a culture of translation. This concept refers to the expectations and practices of a particular society, at a particular time, concerning translation, both in terms of *what* is translated, and *how* it is translated (see also Pym 2017: 143-144).

Cultures of translation are revealing of translation ethics, because an analysis of such cultures foregrounds questions of who translation is for, whose interests translation serves, and what value is ascribed to translations. One of the most influential analyses of cultures of translation, and their ethical implications, is that of the translation scholar Lawrence Venuti (2002/1998, 2008/1995). Venuti's argument is that, in the globally dominant English-language and -culture literary field, translation is shaped by the demand for 'invisibility': translations from less central languages and cultures (or languages and cultures with less economic and symbolic capital, also described as minoritised languages and cultures) are expected to be fully assimilated to the norms and expectations of the dominant (or majoritised) receiving culture, erasing traces of Otherness (except where such Otherness serves the ideological

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purposes of the receiving culture). This is what Venuti describes as the intrinsic ethnocentric violence of translation, a violence that is enacted by the demand for fluency (i.e., the use of 'standard language') in translation, as texts are re-inscribed via translation into the value system of the receiving culture. As an ethical counter-practice, Venuti advocates what he calls 'resistant translation' – approaches to translation that not only select texts for

translation which challenge dominant norms in the receiving culture, but that, in the practice of translation itself, seek to leverage translation methods relying on linguistic repertoires that contest and disrupt the dominant discursive expectations of the recipient linguistic cultures. This may involve not only drawing on the linguistic resources of the original text and language, but also on marginal and non-standard linguistic resources in the recipient language, in order to make the reading experience 'uncomfortable' for the reader of the translation, thus signalling the discomforts of cultural difference. The aim of this practice is to "remedy the asymmetries in translating" (Venuti 2002: 6), by a radical foregrounding of cultural difference.

It should be emphasised that what Venuti proposes is not an anodyne signposting of cultural difference – in other words, using a word or concept from another language, or non-standard language, is not resistant in itself. A translation strategy is not resistant as long as it serves the interests of the receiving culture. So, for example, leaving *gezellig* untranslated in an English self-help book is not by default resistant, since the use of this word may be seen as serving the appetite of English readers for a non-threatening cultural Otherness that can be used as a tool in discourses of self-actualisation. Resistant translation is more complex than this, and is fundamentally an ethical position. It may be seen as akin to other similar notions describing translation practices that foreground the fact of translation (see, e.g., Appiah 1993, Spivak 2009/1993).

It is worth emphasising that these practices and scholarly analyses are focused on linguistic and cultural flows *from* minoritised to majoritised languages and cultures, and far less attention has been given to cultural flows in the opposite direction. Moreover, some have argued that these theorisations of translation and culture do not take adequate account of the complexities of cultures, instead reverting to untenable dichotomisations of origin (source) and recipient (target) text and culture, and a notion of translation that is premised on (Western) concepts of translation as a 'transfer' between two distinct and monolithic cultures, spatially distant from each other. The innate, complex hybrid multilingualism and multiculturalism of many societies in the world, often arising from the legacy of colonialism, and the roles of translation in these contexts, remain underexplored and undertheorised.

### Cultural translation

These challenges to the view of translation as a mediation between distinct cultures have culminated in the concept of 'cultural translation' – a concept that destabilises the traditional parameters of and maybe the very notion of 'translation' itself. It is articulated most fully in the work of postcolonial postmodernist theorist Homi K. Bhabha, in a chapter in his book *The Location of Culture* (2004/1994),

titled "How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation" (see also Maitland 2017, Pym 2017). In the notion of 'cultural translation', the focus shifts from texts to people: conditions of cultural hybridity and mobility (associated with postcolonialism, migration and globalisation) mean that people, themselves, are 'translations', in the sense of

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being carried across languages and cultures, and carrying languages and cultures with and within them. Bhabha draws on the ideas of Walter Benjamin (in his essay "The task of the translator") and Derrida's deconstruction of Benjamin's concepts, but re-places these in the contexts of human migration and dislocation (physical, linguistic, and cultural). Bhabha, then, views cultural translation more broadly, as the "borderline culture of hybridity" (Bhabha 2004: 322), of multilingualism and multiculturalism, a continual, human process – rather than as a textual product brought about by conscious transfer from a source to a target language and culture.

Bhabha celebrates this form of translation of the self, viewing it as "the performative nature of cultural communication" (326), an "empowering condition of hybridity" (324) of the migrant which "desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy" (327). However, scholars like Trivedi (2007: 284) have pointed out that such cultural translation also involves adaptation to the demands of hegemonic Western cultures (and not only an assertion of cultural difference), and as such may also be seen as a pre-emptive translation of the self into (mostly) English. Ultimately, this form of 'cultural translation' may well signal the end of translation (in its traditional sense) itself, since translation becomes "assimilated in just one monolingual global culture" (286).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to move the discussion of the relation between translation and culture beyond the question of whether culture can be translated, which, too often, is answered glibly, with recourse to notions of 'untranslatability' that do not take account of the complexities of language, culture, translation and communication. Interrogating these concepts, themselves, is at the heart of thinking about the relation between language and culture. Moreover, it is evident that, despite the pervasiveness of the 'lost in translation' trope, translation happens – all the time, and mostly successfully. Rather than asking if culture can be translated, we might simply explore how cultures are translated (and why), in all of the many acts of translation that occur everywhere around the world, every day. This, inevitably, leads to an awareness that translation almost always happens under asymmetrical conditions of cultural exchange, raising ethical questions about how cultures ought to be translated.

In all of this, there is one fundamental, unquestioned assumption: that language and culture, and thus translation and culture, are inextricably entwined. However, one-to-one mappings of language and culture are increasingly challenged by the complexities of multilingual and multicultural societies – multilingualism is, after all, the norm for most of the world's population. This, combined with the recent rise of AI and the dizzying developments in algorithmic translation may well, in future, loosen the bonds between culture and translation and alter the very definition of 'translation'. ■



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