Is Culture a Boundary to Translation? A Study of the Cultural Turn in Translation Studies

*[1]Dr. Amit R Prajapati

*[1]Professor, Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Udhna-Magdalla Road, Surat, Gujarat, India.

Abstract

It is notable that various turns in the practice of translation have always preoccupied not only the translation critics but also the practicing translators. Majorly linguistic, cultural and post-colonial turns have, by challenging the activity and the process of translation, also delimited, enriched and expanded the field of Translation Studies. Due to the introduction of the Cultural Turn, the shift from the linguistic turn to the cultural one has been inevitable and noticeable. The operational level of translation cannot be free without entering into the socio-cultural system. This research article very humbly attempts to examine whether culture operates as a boundary to translation delimiting it from the Source Language Text or as a dynamic tool serving as a helping hand to a translator. With the support of the arguments made by certain translation critics, the study finally argues that culture obstructs the activity of translation however it also offers a chance to a translator to redefine the possibilities of translation enriching the Target Language Text. Yes, the untranslatability of some of the culturally loaded words may be realized, solved and redefined by adopting translation strategies like domestication, foreignization, finding for equivalences as cultural substitution etc. It is concluded that though culture poses limits, however it doesn't prohibit but produces.

Keywords: Translation, culture, boundary, linguistic, equivalence.

1. Introduction

Various turns like linguistic, cultural and post-colonial have always preoccupied not only the translation critics but also the practicing translators in the practice of the said activity. By the invasion of such turns, Translation Studies do not get limited but rather enriched by their presence in the field. The Cultural Turn made the Linguistic Turn to pave and clear the way for the other self. This research paper while attempting to examine the role of Cultural Turn in Translation Studies, very humbly states that culture may operate as a boundary to translation delimiting it from the Source Language Text, however it also offers a chance to a translator to redefine the possibilities of translation enriching the Target Language Text. Yes, the untranslatability of some of the culturally loaded words may be met with the introduction of certain translation strategies domestication, foreignization, finding for equivalences as cultural substitution etc.

2. Name and Nature of Culture:

Before examining the relation between culture and Translation Studies, it is necessary to focus on the very concept of what culture is, what the nature of culture is and the history of its development.

i). Concept

Conceptualizing culture seems both imperative and nearly impossible. Brightman (1995) questions the very existence of "culture" when he writes, "The utility, not to mention the integrity, of the construct of culture-as expounded by Tylor, relativized by Boas and thereafter refracted through diverse functionalist, ecological, cognitive, transactionalist, structuralist, Marxian and hermeneutic perspectives-is increasingly being challenged" [1] whereas Katan confesses that "The first area of controversy is in the definition of culture itself" [2]. Raymond Williams declares that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" to define because "it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought" [3]. Though defining culture has been difficult, attempts have been made, notes Katan, to define the same term: "By 1952, Kroeber and Klockhohn had recorded 165 definitions" of culture. [4]

In the modern world, culture is to Williams "the process of human development" [5], to Katan "simple" [6], (Katan 2009: 74), to Arnold "the best that has been thought and said in the world" [7], to Vermeer language is a "part of a culture" [8], to Snell-Hornby "everything one needs to know, master and feel" [9] and to Clyde Kluckhohn "culture" is "a human creation." [10] Widely, culture includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and many other capabilities and habits acquired by human as a social animal willingly or

unwillingly. The human has to follow certain types of behavior created by other human beings for "There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture… Without men, no culture, certainly; but equally and more significantly, without culture, no men." [11] Thus, it refers exclusively to the human ideal of what was civilized in a developed society.

Culture "whether of a people, a period or a group" that uses a particular language as its means of expression, defines their identities, beliefs and values. [12] Both Williams (1983) and Du Gay (1997) relate culture to meaning in society. Identity, another key concept in Cultural Studies, is produced from the cultural and social contexts since each person belongs to a specific culture which forms his/her personality. Culture as fundamental markers of differences among people transforms the phenomenon of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they offer meanings and values.

Globalization has integrated human activities to make the planet one world with a variety of cultures and meanings today. Culture as a totality of knowledge is fundamental in our approach to translation. Translators mediate between cultures seeking to overcome incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning. What has value as a sign in one cultural community may be devoid of significance in another and it is the translator who is uniquely placed to identify the disparity and seek to resolve it.

ii). Origin and Development of Cultural Studies:

Broadly speaking, the roots of Cultural Turn in Translation Studies can be traced to the research into the linguistic nature of translation done by German Romantics Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Humboldt around 1813. Their theories on linguistics, especially Schleiermacher's "Hermeneutics" theory named after the Greek word *hermeneuein* meaning "to understand", examines the intimate relationship between translations and their cultural contexts with strategies of "domesticating" and "foreignizing" which are later developed further by Venuti as "domestication" and "foreignization" (Venuti 1995/2008). Interestingly, Humboldt stated that translation is that task which "cannot be completed" and hence translators sacrifice "the language and style of their own culture." [13] Thereafter, since 1813, a vacuum of hundred and fifty years over the discussion on translation occurred perhaps due to the following three reasons.

The first reason owes to the specific techniques of the Western translation tradition itself. Beginning in the 1950s, the linguistic school of Catford, Newmark, Chomsky and Nida with their goal of "equivalence" and "fidelity" limited its activities to the text itself not allowing its adherents to make the Cultural Turn. The second reason might be of the Cultural Studies which did not come into the mainstream in the West until the 1970s. The third reason is perhaps the translation critics themselves needed time to develop and mature. Holmes's article "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" published in 1972 and Itamar Even Zohar's polysystem theory developed in 1978, which are after 1988, considered foundations of the cultural school, but they had received little attention then due to the lack of awareness of translation critics.

Really, the 1930s is the period of "cultural crisis", comments F. R. Leavis, the British critic, which later on inched towards the Cultural Turn in literature with "the increasing spread of a culture" [14] credited to cultural and post-colonial theorists like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Itamar Even-Zohar, Gayatri Spivak, Tejaswini Niranjana, Gideon Toury, James Holmes, Susan Bassnett, Andre Lefevere, Lawrence Venuti, Theo Hermans, Jose Lambert, a professor of literature in Belgium, R. van den Broek, Dutch writer and others who have each emphasized how translation plays a role in intercultural exchange. Bassnett and Lefevere's comment to let the readers share "the exciting new developments" in translation research confirms, though late, the success of Cultural Turn in Translation Studies. [15]

Different opinions on the growth of Cultural Studies as a translation discipline are numerous. The origin of Cultural Studies as a discipline "can be traced to the late 1950s or early 1960s and to three key texts: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958) and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)." [16] The contribution of many theorists cannot be overlooked to turn translation culturally but Bonnel (1999) considers Clifford Greetz (1993), Michel Foucault (1977) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977) more important for their contribution to Cultural Studies. However, Cultural Studies as a discipline was mainly developed by Richard Hoggart who studied culture in relation to individual lives and coined the term "Cultural Studies" while founding "Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies" (CCCS) in 1964. This new discipline, in a formative period, focused mainly on the crucial shapers of its methodology including Antonio Gramsci, an Italian linguist, Louis Althusser, the French Marxist philosopher and the Frankfurt School set up by Marxist intellectuals like Felix Weil, Friedrich Pollock, George Lukacs and others in 1923.

Katan notes the first use of the term "inter-cultural communication" interpreting "culture" as "silent", "hidden" or "unconscious" yet patterned factor. [17] Conacher uses the same term and Snell-Hornby regards it as "a cross-cultural activity" [18] But it is believed that the first theory in this field was introduced by Georges Mounin, a professor of linguistics and the modern French theorist, in 1963 whereas the concept of "cultural turn" in the cultural translation studies was for the first time introduced by Itamar Even-Zohar of Tel Aviv by his 1978 article "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem". The term "system" originally defined by Tynjanov (1929), presaged by Gideon Toury (1980) and supported by the Russian formalists like Jurij Tynjanov, Roman Jakobson and Boris Ejkhenbaum, denotes the multi-layered structure of cultural elements extended by Even-Zohar into "polysystem" as an interaction between translation and culture. The move from translation as a text to culture and politics is known as the "cultural turn" in TS which has become a ground for a metaphor adopted by Lefevere and Bassnett in 1990 and later on by Snell-Hornby in 2006. Culturally loaded words are almost impossible to translate and even theories are helpless to guide practically. Therefore, a culturally loaded text demands from the translator "proficiency in two languages" and feeling "at home in two cultures" being "bilingual and bicultural" [19] However, such untranslatable cultural phrases fascinate translators because translation is by nature "a cross-cultural communication" rather than a mere handling of languages. [20] The more complexities of differences between cultures are known, the better the translation will be. One visibly experiences culture "only when differences appear." [21] However, all actually do not accept "the relevance of cultural differences in translation." [22]

In 1985, Theo Hermans, a British translation theorist, identifies translation as a representation of culturally conditioned social aspects having expectations that lead to the

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collision between one culture and other cultures making translation a more meaningful object of research. The collisions occur due to what Peter Newmark suggests each language's culturally specific features that invite a translator to determine his/her strategies. [23] The language with a limited scope forces the translator to have *skopos*, a Greek word meaning an "aim" or "purpose" reminding one of the *skopos* theory developed by a German scholar Vermeer in the late 1970s. It reflects a shift from the formal theories to the functional concept of translation. This theory views translation as a specific form of human action with a purpose. Neither the language nor the culture, Vermeer argues opposite to Newmark, but the *skopos* determines translation strategies employed to produce functionally adequate result. Vermeer and Reiss in a 1984 book suggest *translatum* (transference) method, also suggested by Newmark and determined by its *skopos*, to retain the local colour of the SL culture. [24]

In addition to *skopos*, according to Venuti, effective powers of social institutions including editors, literary agents, marketing and sales teams and reviewers that commission translators and hence dictate them the translation strategy. Wiersema states that the translator has three options for the translation of cultural elements: Rewriting the text to make it more comprehensible to the target-language audience or to adopt the foreign word with explanation or without explanation as "foreignization", preferred to by Venuti (1992), as a strategy that renders translator visible. A linguistically handicapped translator encounters cultural differences as the vicissitudes of translation very painfully. Feleppa (1988), Needham (1972) and Tambiah (1990) have explored the degree to which the translators with the potential untranslatability come across non-equivalents. The texts of two distinguished specific cultures test the translator's knowledge of semantics and lexical sets because the translator has to render the foreign familiar and preserve foreignness at one and the same time.

Should the target text be challenging for a reader, the globalized technology i.e. "internet" can help him/her understand foreign elements in the text, thus providing more opportunities for foreignization. Moreover, a reader's inability to understand an unknown concept in the target culture adds to the translator's responsibility. Language is really a symbol of culture. Language to culture is what heart is to body. Language not only reflects the culture but also provides access to the culture by being influenced and restricted, thus proving their inter-dependence. Thus, for the *skopos* theorists, such as Hans Honig and Paul Kussmaul (1982), J. Holz-Mänttäri (1984), Sigrid Kupsch-Losereit (1986), Heidrun Witte (1987), ChristianeNord (1988), Margaret Ammann (1989/1990) and Katharina Reiss (1991). Culture is inextricably bound to translation and translation is a cultural intercourse conducted through the carrier of language.

A translator's language must meet the requirements of the culture because "The Task of the Translator" (1923) is "to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another language" and if the translator refers to the notion of "Context in Situation" and "Context of Culture", it is possible. [25] Yes, very often, context while explaining culture provides a better meaning than the term being analyzed. Hence, meaning is not 'carried' by language but negotiated between readers from within their own contexts of culture to receive the text according to their own expectations and translation is necessarily a relativist form of "manipulation" (Hermans 1985), "mediation" (Katan 1999/2004) or "refraction" (Lefevere 1982/2004) between

two "different linguacultures" (Agar 1994).

Thus, the cultural turn examines the ways in which translation is nourished by–and contributes to–the dynamics of cultural representation. The term "cultural translation", used in many contexts and senses, challenges the traditional parameters of TS as a metaphor. Used in a narrow sense, the term refers to the practice of literary translation that mediates cultural difference. But theories like domestication offer it another, a political turn known as the post-colonial. Thus, cultural translation focuses a perspective on translations in the light of changing cultures. The turn from cultural to postcolonial examines a number of directions highlighting historical, ideological and cultural translation. This cultural turn indicates that translators are never innocent and can never be as their translations are always marked in one or the other way by an age, living culture and power relation that operates in this culture. Cultural orientation as an approach begins in formalist-structuralist version representing the TS and continuing with feminist and post-colonial approach in recent years becoming more prominent of deconstruction.

Much of postcolonial translation, with its self-reflexive thoughts on the strategy and aim of translation, can be seen as part of the cultural turn. Thus, the focus of Translation Studies seems to be shifting to the broader area that is encompassed by the rubric of cultural studies and this cultural turn paves the way for meaningful studies of the postcolonial aspects of translation because culture as a form of "hegemony" involves invisible consent on the part of the "subaltern" who according to Gayatri Spivak (1988) could not speak/protest.

3. What is a Cultural Boundary?

The cultural boundary restricts the travel of the meaning from one language into another due to complex whole "which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." [26] Encyclopaedia Britannica notes, "In *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, (1952), U.S. anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn talked about culture ranging from "learned behaviour" to "ideas in the mind," "a logical construct," "a statistical fiction," "a psychic defense mechanism," and so on. The definition—or the conception—of culture that is preferred by Kroeber and Kluckhohn and also by a great many other anthropologists is that culture is an abstraction or, more specifically, "an abstraction from behaviour." [27]

When one reads and attempts to analyse the definitions of culture, one inevitably realizes the complexity of culture along with understanding what it is. Thus, culture being a system of shared interpretations, traditions, conventions, rituals, religions, superstitions, ideology, social behaviour etc, it is not easy to understand and interpret the culture. The literary text produced out of these complexities of the culture of the time and place where and when it is written, when gets translated, these complex cultural structure of the words of the text do not find exact and direct equivalents in the Target Language. Nida has rightly said, "Cultural differences may cause more serious complications for the translator than the structure of the languages involved." [28] Nida highlights the difficulty that the translator faces not only linguistically but culturally.

Kinship terms, the names of the different food items, names of different festivals, ritual practices, idioms and phrases, proverbs, social hierarchy etc. may be considered the examples of cultural boundaries. Such terms hardly have readily available equivalents.

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4. The Interface between Culture and Translation:

The birth of culture in relation to Translation Studies has been termed as the 'cultural turn'. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in their book *Translation, History and Culture* clearly justifies that this shift is "a move away from narrow linguistic approaches to an examination of translation as rewriting and cultural production." [29] Translation is always a communication and communion between not only two languages but also two cultures. Says George Steiner in his text *After Babel*, "To a greater or lesser degree, every language offers its own reading of life. To move between languages, to translate, even within restrictions of totality, is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit to-wards freedom." [30] Culture offers a context, a point of view, an identity and universality.

The example of cultural untranslatability is realized when the concept of the culture of the Source Language Text does not exist in the culture of the Target Language. Roman Jakobson argues that poetry intensely includes the density of the cultural idioms, symbolism etc and hence difficult to translate. He writes, "Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible." [31] Cultural boundary challenges the translation but it does not nullify it. Fernandez writes in his BA Thesis Module:

"A literary translation, Appiah argues, doesn`t communicate the foreign author's intentions, but tries to create a relationship to the linguistic and literary conventions of the translating culture that matches the relationship between the foreign text and its own culture. The match is never perfect and might be 'unfaithful to the literal intentions' of the foreign text so as 'to preserve formal features'" [32]

Risto Jukko refers to the relationship between translation and the cultural turn in literature. He writes:

"This shift in translation studies from linguistic approaches to cultural approaches took place as scholars became more and more acutely aware that translation is essentially a cultural phenomenon. Translation never happens in a vacuum. The shift, "the cultural turn" in translation studies, seems to follow a general trend in the humanities and social sciences, which have been influenced by e.g. postmodernist, postcolonial and feminist movements (see, e.g., Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Gentzler 2001a; Wang Hui 2011; Flotow 2011). And yet, this seems to have happened without always explicitly defining some key terms, especially the concept of *culture*, which is a rather complex term with regard to its contents as well as its boundaries. In this study culture is understood to be a broad concept consisting in "patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values.

Culture encompasses a way of life that is learned and shared by members of a particular society; cultures include symbols, artifacts and values, in particular. Cultures develop and evolve on a social level, which is higher than that of an individual. Reflecting various aspects of our lives and environments, languages and religions can be justly considered expressions of culture. Culture entails activities shared by an ethnic, linguistic or religious human group. The role of translation can therefore be considered culturally significant in that the cultural processes involved in translation entail a constant borrowing and mixing of ideas and practices. Linguistic units, small or large, simply cannot be fully understood in isolation from the particular culture in which they each acquire and retain a meaning or meanings.

Even though translation without culture is impossible, there is no universal understanding of the significance of culture for translation studies. Some say that language and culture are two distinct entities (e.g. Reddy 1986), while others view language as culture (e.g. Nida 2001). Consequently, the former appear to think that translation is a universal linguistic operation of transfer of meaning: the message is first encoded in one language and then decoded (or recoded) in another language. In practice, what this means then is that culture – cultural differences included – can be carried into another language through linguistic operations (cf. the Latin *translation, translatum* from *transfero*, 'carry across'). The latter in turn seem to think that meanings cannot be carried over from language to language by linguistic operations. Rather, it is negotiated within each context of culture. Each reader receives and interprets a text according to his or her own expectations. The act of reading and the act of interpretation of any text are inseparable. Translation is thereby inevitably relativized; it becomes a process of, e.g., "manipulation" (Hermans 1985), "mediation" (Katan 2004) or "refraction" (Lefevere 2008) between two different cultures (Katan 2009: 75).

The concept of *cultural translation* is understood in this study of literary translation to mean "those practices of literary translation that mediate cultural difference or try to convey extensive cultural background or set out to represent another culture via translation" (Sturge 2011: 67). Cultural translation is not limited solely to the linguistic level, even though complex technical issues such as dialect, intertextual literary allusions – especially cultural-religious allusions in the case of William Faulkner's *Light in August* – food names and architecture are dealt with. Cultural translation deals also with the assumed contextual cultural knowledge of the source text readership and conveys its meaning to the target text readership. As Sturge (2011: 67) notes, it is important to underline that cultural translation does not usually mean any particular type of translation strategy but rather entails a perspective or perspectives on translations.

Some proponents of the postcolonial translation theory (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Wolf 2002) criticize the notion of cultural translation, affirming that translation is less an interlingual transfer as a procedure than itself a fabric of culture. Doris Bachmann-Medick (2006: 37), for instance, argues that the translatedness of cultures is often referred to as 'hybridity.' It shifts the concept of culture "towards a dynamic concept of culture as a practice of negotiating cultural differences and of cultural overlap, syncretism and creolization." The distinction between source language cultures and target language cultures seems to be blurred when cultures are seen as dynamic processes of translation. The postcolonial translation theory seems to be right to assert that literary translation is more than linguistics; it is also a question of cultures, of which religion is typically an important component." [33]

5. Conclusion

Fernandez further argues about the interaction between translation and culture and says that culture impacts and constrains translation and also influences 'the larger issues of context, history and convention.' [34] Jukko while arguing about the relationship between the translator and the text says that the translator before being a translator is a reader of the text first of all. Jukko says:

"The translator is also a reader of a text. A text is not passively received by the reader, but – and especially in the

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case of the translator – actively constructed with a view complying with the reader's horizon of expectations (e.g. Jauss 1989). These horizons are typically cultural, literary, religious and ethical in character. The relationship between a reader and a text is dissimilar to that between an observer and an object within one culture. As to the translator, in order to be able to detect intertexts in the framework of his or her horizon of expectations, s/he needs to be familiar with cultures, foreign ones as well as his or her own... Knowing about cultures and religions means being familiar with, among other things, various cultural-religious concepts." [35]

To conclude, it can be said that the culture imposes boundaries on translation, however these boundaries can be withdrawn, overcome by various translation strategies. The Cultural Turn has rendered translation as an activity of rewriting. The strategies like domestication and foreignization are successful to negotiate cultural differences. Yes, though culture resists translation, it also shapes it. Translation is the very medium through which the culture rendered into different language becomes meaningfully universal. The translator should not try to destroy but rather navigate the boundary in the act of translation, considering culture not the endpoint but the beginning. The French scholar Paul Ricoeur has pertinently said, "Text implies texture, that is, complexity of composition. Text also implies work, that is, labour in forming language. Finally, text implies inscription, in a durable monument of language, of an experience to which it bears testimony. By all of these features, the notion of the text prepares itself for an analogical extension to phenomena not specifically limited to writing, nor even to discourse." [36] (Ricoeur 1998: 37). Translation – especially literary translation – is a cultural extension of both intertextuality and the human condition.

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