

BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
The Faculty of International Business and Economics
The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of ASE
10th International Conference: Synergies in Communication (SiC)
Bucharest, Romania, 27-28 October 2022

FRAMING LITERARY TRANSLATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The current paper focuses on setting the boundaries of literary translation in the 21st century as a form of intertextual and intercultural transfer, during the course of an era that spans under the general umbrella of globalization and digitalization. Language is a dynamic tool put into the service of human communication that strengthens social interaction and cross-cultural communication. Global communication would be left in the lurch without productive translation as communication across cultures involves translation, translation in turn implies cross-cultural communication, so translation is the main field of research in which interlingual differences may be explored, appreciated, and interpreted or understood. Had it not been for translation, numerous valuable literary works could not have spread to other linguistic and cultural spaces since translation transports them across linguistic and cultural borders thanks to the translators' interpretative and productive effort. The paper equally highlights the current perspective upon literary translation and the challenges that literary translators as professional rewriters face. It is worth noting that the breathtaking developments in technology and in the globalization process have together radically changed the job profile of translators, but changes have come with both ups and downs.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; culture; equivalence; literary translation; literary translator.

DOI: 10.24818/SIC/2022/01.04

1. Introduction

The roots of the preoccupation for translation stretch back to ancient times. Widely used, but little theorized translation has a long history of usage, probably as long as human communication itself or any other language, though mostly it had been taken for granted, barely getting the scrutiny it so urgently required. The outset of the new millennium placed translation in its global context by providing a broad contextual framework in which literary texts and their translations are embedded in more extended social and cultural systems, including economic, political, and ideological systems.

Translation does not only mean transfer of meaning, but also of the tone, the flavour, a combination of words and literature leading to a recreation of the original text. Texts are more than simple bundles of words, they reflect our experience, thoughts, emotions, social interactions, or a certain ideology. All rewritings, whatever their function and regardless of any possible losses may distort literature or display slippages of meaning so as to fit into a given society in a given way at a given time. Therefore understanding the linguistic, semantic and pragmatic features of language ensures the production of a reliable and purposeful translation.

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Framing literary translation in the 21st century means interpreting texts according to their linguistic features on a par with cultural immersion in such a way that meaning becomes context-sensitive, thus allowing contextualization and (re)contextualization. Hence, words are meant to be translated as seeking for a meaning in the target text rather than drawing upon ready-made sense.

Literary translation is equally influenced by human, linguistic and sociocultural factors. As a “creative response, rather than a mechanical rewording” (Attridge, 2004, 74) it produces communication and engages the reader’s attention. The following research questions follow from the above: What is the starting point and evolutionary pattern of literary translation? To what extent can literary translation be envisaged as a form of creative rewriting? Can literary translation and culture be assessed as interconnected? What impact have globalization and technological advances had on the body of literary translators?

2. *Defining literary translation*

Ever since the spring of *Translation Studies* as a discipline and altogether of literary translation, theorists have positioned themselves in between the two ends of the continuum balancing between the idea of approaching translation in opposing terms of right or wrong, good or bad or showing complete disregard for such sharp positioning. Early encounters of literary translation with prominent scholars (notably, Nida, 1964, Catford, 1965, Newmark, 1981, Hermans, 1995) have brought to the fore core concepts for defining literary translation such as *accuracy, equivalence and correspondence*.

Equivalence became a blurry concept having manifold interpretations across many approaches, but remaining core to all interpretations. Described by Hermans as a “troubled notion” (1995, 217), *equivalence*, especially in literary translation has come to hold sway over other approaches, its understanding varying from writer to writer. The concept of equivalence initially postulated by Nida (1964) was to dominate the next two decades despite considerably different opinions as to its exact meaning and application. Nida (1964, 159) puts forward two types of equivalence: *formal equivalence* which is mainly oriented towards the source text structure by focusing on the form and content of the message to be transmitted and *dynamic equivalence* which aims at seeking the “closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” (Nida, 1964, 166) so as to make the translation sound natural and be relevant within the cultural context of the target reader.

Catford (1965) does not regard translation as being equal to achieving equivalence of meaning, which is highly desirable but hardly achievable, but rather having to do with identifying target text meanings that are interchangeable with source text meanings in a specific case. The two types of equivalence proposed by Catford are *formal correspondence* and *textual equivalence*, two concepts that overlap the dichotomy proposed by Nida between *formal* and *dynamic equivalence*. Catford (1965) has rather a simplistic view of translation by seeing it as a matter of simple substitution of source language items with the most suitable target language equivalents, a step which “distorts the basic problems of translation” (Snell-Hornby, 1988, 22) by reducing the implications of translation to the linguistic process with complete disregard for cultural, textual, or other situational factors which are currently taken into account when it comes to translation assessment.

Newmark suggests the following taxonomy: *semantic translation* and *communicative translation* (1981, 38) as a step forward from Nida’s dichotomy between *formal* and *dynamic equivalence*. There is a fine line to be drawn between the concepts described by Nida and Newmark. In this respects, Newmark clarified that: *semantic translation* is primarily concerned with the intentions of the source text writer by focusing on the cognitive processes of the transmitter as an individual, thus remaining anchored within the source text culture, whereas *communicative translation* adopts a reader-oriented approach as it aims to produce on the target text readers more or less the same effect as the original text on its readers by conveying the original message in a form that conforms to the linguistic, cultural and pragmatic conventions of the target language while relying extensively on the principle of accuracy of communication (1981, 39-69). Newmark’s theory has been criticized for its strong prescriptivism and he himself later united the two translation strategies under the term “correlative

theory of translation” (2003, 22-23) after coming to grips with the fact that one can never translate entirely either semantically or communicatively. However, its value outweighs its drawbacks as it aims to fill the void between the theory of translation and the practice of translation while “enabling the translator to pause and think [...] translation being simultaneously envisaged as a science, art and craft” (Vilceanu, 2017, 9).

Although currently cast aside as outworn, Nida’s theory paved the way for the move from *literal vs. free translation* into the modern era. Different problems, same solutions known by different names but essentially similar have generated extensive theoretical reflection thus aiming to bridge the disconnect between abstract theory and hands-down practice : *formal vs. dynamic equivalence* Nida (1964), *formal correspondence vs. textual equivalence* Catford (1965), *semantic vs. communicative translation* Newmark (1981), each of these oppositions tries to solve a different problem with new terms, a new insight from a different perspective.

Literary translation which is basically the activity of translating creative literature, prose or verse is described by Boase-Beier et al. as both “the translation of texts that are considered to be literally” and “the translation of texts in a literary way” (2018,4). As far as the former definition is regarded, we start from the assumption that a literary text is necessarily so based on the nature of the source text. However, there are other types of texts such as advertisements, songs, slogans, religious or military texts which use literary and rhetorical devices. Since there are so many confusing directions in defining a literary text Boase-Beier et al (2018, 3) name three important qualities that they must have: to be fictional, to employ literary devices and to have particular cognitive effects on its readers. The latter definition that literary translation is concerned with “the translation of texts in a literary way” (Boase-Beier et al, 2018, 4) illustrates a more general observation which can be made regarding the crucial role that literary works have played in the development of translation theory that has enabled the reshaping of a possibly monocultural nation into one that is more exposed to foreign influences.

3. *A diachronic perspective upon literary translation*

True understanding of literary translation requires a chart of its history. The upgrade of translation to the status of an academic subject is attributed to Holmes who described the field as primarily dealing “with the complex of problems clustered round the phenomenon of translating and translation” (1988/2004, 181).

Holmes (1972) became a visionary of translation, in particular of literary translation, moving between the separate boundaries of literature and linguistics by setting forth a tripartite division of *Translation Studies* including:

- *a theoretical branch* further divided into general theories (which account for any type of translation) and partial theories (which are restricted according to text - type, time, area, rank, medium and problem);
- *a descriptive branch* which may examine the product (involves analysis of existing translations), the function (more preoccupied with the context and the influences that were exerted upon the source text) and the process (trying to explain the cognitive process that are activated in the mind of the translator);
- *an applied branch* which theorizes translation practice including translator training, translation aids and translation criticism.

Though perceived as a rather simplistic and segregated approach by many scholars, Holmes’ map is recognized as a turning point of this domain of interest into a science. It equally responded to the need of literary scholars to work with linguists as a common ground for collaboration. Holmes pointed out the limitations existing at the time when lacking a well-shaped theoretical background, translation was dispersed across older disciplines such as language studies or linguistics. Anticipating some later directions Holmes’ theory served its purpose to bridge the existing gap between theory and practice which had not been overcome up until then. It clearly paved the way for forthcoming directions of

research, anticipating the future trends of both *Descriptive Translation Studies* and of the *Skopos Theory* (Snell-Hornby, 2006, 44). *Descriptive Translation Studies* has for the most part remained oriented to literary texts. Holmes` vision was later developed by Zohar and Toury whose *Polysystem Theory* became a milestone in translation research. The researchers described literary translations as parts of the receiving culture or target system. This means that literature functions as a system of interrelated forms and canons that limit the translator`s choices and strategies (Venuti, 2012,137).

4. A synchronic perspective upon literary translation

4.1. An interdisciplinary and ever-evolving complex phenomenon

Theorists have approached the problem of translation from various angles which has led to a large number of definitions, mostly dating from the 1960s onwards, thus making the study of translation a truly interdisciplinary field. Scott (2018, 109) envisages the future of literary translation by means of a projective approach based on variation and inclusiveness that would allow literary texts to be constantly re-located whilst allowing literatures to create their own meshwork of literary terms constantly renewable.

The current perspective upon literary translation is incorporated within an interdisciplinary framework, as a discipline which widely explores cross-language communication. It is precisely this culture-oriented approach that makes it a productive field which draws on and contributes to a wide range of fields such as culture, communication science, discourse analysis, pragmatics and semantics. Bringing new concepts and practices into the perimeter of literary translation has led to shifting of boundaries from a retrospective focus on non-change and equivalence to an approach that privileges change and dynamics because translation involves choices that vary to a great extent across time, cultures, and languages.

Translation research has evolved in a continuous pace from language-centred approaches towards approaches that include context, ideologies, and power relations. Thus, it has gone a long way from relying almost exclusively on linguistics and literary criticism as a main source of theories and methods. It moves beyond the spreading of new concepts and ideas as it pushes readers to refine their own linguistic knowledge. Linguistic analysis is supported by concepts and ideologies developed outside language studies to recreate the socio-cultural context of the original text. Only a translation of this type can legitimately be assessed according to its equivalence relationship with the source text, which proves that “language, culture, nation and translation are interconnected within this framework” (Vilceanu 2021, 193).

4.2. Literary translation and culture

There seem to be conflicting interpretations in what concerns the translator`s main task. Some theorists find that the “translator speaks for the source writer and hence has no independent stylistic voice” whereas others “advocate that the translator`s voice should be made distinctly present in the translated text” (Jones, 2009,154). Baker (2000) steers a middle course by stating that in the process of translation inevitably translators leave their own mark upon the texts they produce. Recurring difficulties in translation are generated by cultural exchange. Hence, Nida specifies “the fact that not all language-cultures use similar terms for corresponding positions of responsibility creates special problems for translators” (2001,7).

Translation is a complex phenomenon which cannot be defined solely on a linguistic basis with complete disregard for context and culture, the main plea in support of this claim being that translating a literary text sets in motion all kinds of factors other than the linguistic. It stands to reason that translation goes hand in hand with linguistics as the former relies on the latter to find the proper tools to scrutinize language from different angles. And yet any translation ought to be seen holistically, as part and parcel of the target culture. Literary translations are truly understood and

processed only when seen in the context of the cultural systems in which they were produced, so translation brings us closer to foreign cultures and societies.

Trying to find an answer to the question of whether or not there is a direct connection between the culture in which a text was written, and its use of figurative language Snell-Hornby (1988, 19) puts into practice the strategy of finding a dynamically equivalent solution to a translation problem by showing us how the substitution of a culturally meaningful item with a correspondent one in the target culture works. Such an example is represented by the fact that in the translation of the Bible for the Eskimos the phrase “Lamb of God” has been translated as “Seal of God” as an example of cultural adaptation because lambs are unknown in polar regions.

The 1980s witnessed a shift of paradigm in the study of translation produced by a division in ideological affiliation between the *Manipulation School* focusing mainly on literary translation in English and the functional approach inspired by Vermeer visible mostly in German. For reasons of space and consistency of approach, our focus will be on the former. The *Manipulation School* brought forward innovative terms such as descriptive, target-oriented, functional, and systemic which radically opposed guidelines of translation at the time, summarized as prescriptive, source-text oriented, linguistic, and atomistic.

The emphasis shifts towards the “recipient culture” and “translators operate first and foremost in the interest of the culture into which they are translating, and not in the interest of the source text, let alone the source culture” (Toury, 1985, 18-19). For Toury culture is an all-encompassing term including the social context involved in the translation, norms, conventions, ideology, and values of that society. The transfer of culture-bound items becomes an important area of concern as “not the linguistic features of the source text are then the central issue, but the function of the translation in the target culture” (Snell-Hornby, 2006, 49). The dominant culture-oriented perspective upon translation was taken up by the scholars representing the descriptive approach and has come to play a central role in literary Translation Studies under the name *Cultural Turn* (Basnett and Lefevre, 1998). For Basnett and Lefevre, literary texts “become cultural capitals across cultural boundaries” (1998,13).

Globalization has increased intercultural exchanges by creating a friendly environment for the constant evolution of languages, cultures, social and ideological networks characterized by mutual acceptance, flexibility and constant change. Tolerance to other languages and cultures comes as a result of the presence and awareness of linguistic diversity. A language may partly lose its identity in the process of translation by being constantly re-located and re-conferred which fully justifies the conclusion that “translation is not about the preservation of a text, but about the projection of a text into its possible futures” (Scott, 2018,10).

5. *The current status of literary translators-challenges and perspectives*

Technological innovation and global developments have pushed the world towards a digital paradigm highlighting the important interpretive role of the reader. Readers of any literary translation interpret the text as distinct readers situated in a particular time and place. Hence, the path to a successful translation seems to be dependent on having a sense of balance and avoidance of exaggeration that requires translators to master literary skills, have linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence. This is what motivates Dejjica to state “I see translators as mediators who are working with different languages and who invariably, just as seeds, continually absorb elements from different cultures” (2009, 41).

Literary translators need to take into account the cultural, ideological, social, political, historical and geographical context in which the source text was written and by which it was influenced as no text can truly be meaningful if analysed outside the context in which it was produced, disregarding the factors and the motives that contributed to the text production. Literary translations of contemporary texts are produced within a changing landscape where terms like “literary” and “classical” and “canon” are no longer absolutes but depend, again, on ideological contexts and perspectives. Even

though the aesthetic negotiations that literary translators have to go through for the cultural discourses they settle have developed under the impact of recent finding in both theory and practice of translation in the sense that translators are no longer equivalence bound, they may nevertheless feel as part of the large propaganda machine.

Albadejo and Chico-Rico describe the translator as a producer, an interpreter, and a recipient whose translation task is founded on consistency “in keeping with the characteristics of the source literary text and with its production context in historical and cultural terms” (2018,119). The translator thus becomes a negotiator between languages and cultures. The translated text is the result of an intricate process which involves the replacement of certain elements in the source text with elements in the target text that the translator comes to attain after undergoing a stage of interpretation. This comes with full acknowledgement of the linguistic and cultural gaps that almost always exist between the source text and the target text. The translator may face the troublesome choice of deciding between fidelity and freedom. We reckon that he/she should adopt a midway position in this respect. Apart from translating the linguistic features of the source text, translators should bear in mind that the hidden meaning or the connotations of the translated text may get a completely different perspective in the target language. Cultural differences also need to be taken care of.

Starting from the hypothesis that in what regards translation there should be a continual interplay between theoretical models and practical case studies while pointing out that the 21st century has yet to solve the long-established definition of translation as an art, a craft or a science, Vilceanu (2021:191) empowers (literary) translators to settle the balance in this controversy. How can this be done? By considering literary translation from an ergonomic perspective, which basically means that translators should be able to follow a twofold approach upon their work. On one hand to satisfy the demands of the client and secure quality preservation (product-oriented perspective) and on the other hand to master the introspection ability that allows them to reflect objectively on their work (process-oriented perspective). This approach is not entirely new to the theory of translation as it had been placed under scrutiny before by theorists of the functional approach and cognitive approach, but rather in a segregated manner.

The current status of literary translation, including its connection with the publishing industry must be viewed particularly within the context of the present-day globalized culture in which the upswing in technology and the recent Covid-19 crisis have affected the lives of literary translators to a great extent. The already existing risky contract situations and unproper working conditions in addition to unfair remuneration have become ever poorer. (Literary) Translators already struggling with significant losses of income following cancelled live events (readings, lectures, workshops, literary festivals) and closure of bookshops also had to deal with a shallow and incoherent way of representing their interests by the governments. On top of that literary translators also faced loss of digital remuneration after many governments made many of the works of translators worldwide available online free of charge, which makes it impossible to make a living from this profession.

6. *Conclusions*

Under the general umbrella of globalization and digitalization, literary translation, as a form of intertextual and intercultural transfer remains an integrated discipline in the field of Translation Studies ever on the increase. We need to consider the borderlands and hybridity in terms of literary translation, and the necessity of going forward to engage with other fields of study, including cultural studies, linguistics, history and philosophy. Literary translation is so much more than an attentive reading of the source text and a rewriting of it in the target language, it is above all a recreation of it reflected into another culture.

The transfer of the linguistic characteristics of the source text becomes essential for the translation of a literary text, thanks to which it will be perceived and valued as having that status. Any literal translator must pay attention to the complexity accompanying literary translation. Apart from

conveying linguistic information, any text is also a bearer of various extra-linguistic factors (which may be historical, cultural, or social) that require decoding and encoding. Translation becomes a process in which linguistic and extra-linguistic factors contribute and shape the final product. Far from taking place in a sort of cultural and social vacuum, translation requires enhanced accommodation effort which can only derive from a full compliance with linguistic and cultural norms at all levels of analysis: morpho-syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Any text, especially any literary text, is anchored in a specific culture.

An awareness of such an issue can direct us towards interpreting translation as a process which occurs between cultures rather than between languages, while paying rapt attention to the fact that the connotations of text production and reception may vary from culture to culture. Even though at a glance, literary translation may seem like an ideal interface for theories about language and communication, it is an enriching and productive field whose essence “seems to be best captured by the words dynamics and sustainability” (Vilceanu 2021, 94), one of the most effective ways of constructing cross-cultural bridges.

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