MULTICULTURAL TRANSLATION AMONG DEFINITIONS AND TAXONOMY. BRIEF OVERVIEW ON CULTURAL-SPECIFIC ITEMS, QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND CRITICISM IN LITERARY TRANSLATION.

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Abstract: Approaching the multicultural translation has become more and more challenging for the young scholar in TS in the last decades, both theoretically and methodologically. Once assumed, at the beginning of 21st century, the concept of translation as a cultural act, that is TS as the study of cultural interaction and the translation as a manipulative method facilitating cultural communication, there was a flourishing of definitions and classifications of its key concepts: what is cultural, at what text level should it be analysed, how is it translated, etc. By one hand, this can be seen in a very positive way since it reflects the great attractiveness and vitality of TS as a discipline. However, it has also undeniably created a methodological fragmentation that could be objectively difficult to handle with.
In the spirit of the interdisciplinarity that has always characterized the TS, most of these attempts have retrieved and updated already existent terms like the so-called realia, adding new perspectives linked to specific translation fields, especially to the audio-visual translation (subtitling and dubbing). Besides, the increasing numbers of studies investigating the connections between culture and translation has led to a consequent revisiting of the Translation Quality Assessment and Translation Criticism. This paper is then expectably intended to offer an effective brief critical overview on these key concepts in multicultural translation.

Keywords: Translations Studies (TS), Cultural-Specific Items, Translation Quality Assessment, Translation Criticism

Introduction

Approaching the multicultural translation has become more and more challenging for the young scholar in TS in the last decades, both theoretically and methodologically. Once assumed, at the beginning of 21st century, the concept of translation as a cultural act, that is TS as the study of cultural interaction and the translation as a manipulative method facilitating cultural communication (Bassnet and Lefevere, 2001), there was a flourishing of definitions and classifications of its key concepts: what is cultural, at what text level, how is it translated, etc. By one hand, this can be seen in a very positive way since it reflects the great attractiveness and vitality of TS as a discipline. However, it has also undeniably created a methodological fragmentation that could be objectively difficult to handle with.

In the spirit of the interdisciplinarity that has always characterized the TS, most of these attempts have retrieved and updated already existent terms like the so-called realia, adding new perspectives linked to specific translation fields, especially to the audio-visual translation (subtitling and dubbing). Therefore, Realia have been enriched with more nuance, becoming Cultural-specific items (CSIs), Cultural-specific references, Cultural-bounded terms, Extralinguistic Cultural References (ERCs), and so forth.

Besides, the increasing numbers of studies investigating the connections between culture and translation has led to a consequent revisiting of the Translation Quality Assessment and Translation Criticism as *key concepts in multicultural translation.*

Definitions and taxonomy (types of cultural items and translation strategies)

One of the problems that arouse the interest of translation specialists has always been that of the so-called ***realia***. The term was used by Latin medieval scholars to indicate "real things" as opposed to words, which were considered neither "things" nor "real". Into this meaning, realia indicate the objects of material culture. In the field of TS, realia instead do not indicate objects, but signs and precisely those words that mean objects of material culture without precise correspondences in other languages. They pose the problem of translatability since they often call non-existent referents in the TL, so they require specific translation strategies. In TS, important contributions to the ***definition of realia*** have come from Eastern European schools. In particular two Bulgarian researchers, Sergej Vlahov and Sider Florin, have offered a detailed study on the untranslatability including realia defined as

> […] words (and composed expressions) of the popular language representing denominations of objects, concepts, typical phenomena of a given geographic place, of material life or of social-historical peculiarities of some people, nation, country, tribe, that for this reason carry a national, local or historical colour; these words do not have exact matches in other languages. (Vlahov and Florin 1969, 438)

They ***classify realia*** into three main categories: geographical, ethnographic, social and political, and also illustrate the related ***translation strategies***: transliteration (recognition of the alien element, neuter rendering), transcription (recognition of the alien element, neuter rendering and adaptation of the spelling, greater appropriation), creation of a specific analogue (partial recognition of the alien element, neuter rendering), explicitation (no recognition of the alien element, specifying rendering), substitution with a local variant (appropriation of the alien element and specifying rendering), substitution with an "international" variant (assimilation of the alien element and generalizing rendering), addition of an identifier (recognition of the alien element on content but not on formal plane, neuter rendering). Moreover, Vlahov and Florin distinguish transcription (transcription proper with emphasis on the sound and transliteration with emphasis on the graphic form) from translation (neologism as calque, half calque, appropriation, semantic neologism). Finally, they explain the approximate translation (generalization, functional analogue, description, explanation, interpretation) and contextual translation, among the possible strategies in realia translation, and in general in cultural bound translation. According to Bulgarian scholars, the choice of strategies obviously depends on the type of text, the type and role of realia in the source and target culture, the significance of realia in the context, the target language capacity to accept new / exotic collocations, the receiving model reader.

After Vlahov and Florin's study, interesting discussions on the topic have been developed by TS scholars especially within the audio-visual field, enlarging the concept to the cultural bound item's translatability. Thus, realia are defined as "extralinguistic references to items that are tied up with a country's culture, history, or geography" (Diaz Cintas and Remael 2007, 200) or as "concepts which are found in a given source culture but not in a given target culture" (Leppihalme 2011, 6). Realia are therefore seen as the ***result of cultural differences*** (extralinguistic) not to be confused with the differences between languages (intralinguistic). Beside the term realia, and with similar meaning depending on scholars' view about reality and culture concepts, we find terms such as "culture-specific items" CSIs (Nord 1999, Aixela 1996), "extralinguistic references ECRs" (Pedersen 2010), "culture specific references" (Ramière 2006), "culture-bound terms" (Diaz Cintas and Remael 2007). Equally stimulating for the discussion are the concepts of ***realia fuzzy boundaries*** (Leppihalme 1997) and the different degrees of ***transculturality, monoculturality and infraculturality*** (Pedersen 2010). Transcultural are cultural items transcending the cultural borders, present both in source and target culture, and normally does not pose particular problems in translation (for example there are names of Italian food like "ravioli" or "lasagne" often rendered in translation with well acclimatized neologisms). Monocultural are cultural items present only in the source culture and involve translator's competence to mediate the cultural transfer (for example in AE there are slang names of currency such as "fin", "bucks" or measurement unit names such as "feet", "pound" often rendered in translation with neutral hyperonyms, with a losing colour effect). Infracultural are cultural items of the source culture less known to the source audience too and usually the source co-text contains some elements ensuring the correct meaning interpretation.

As the classification of the ***types of realia*** is concerned, the ***most detailed taxonomy*** remains Vlahov and Florin's:

- Geographical [physical and objects geography (landscape and meteo, man-made elements); endemic animals and plants]
- Ethnographic [daily life (food and drinks, shops, clothing, housing); work (jobs, tools); art and culture (music and instruments, dance, religion, rituals, games, mythology); descent (peoples and heritage); measures (currency, measurement unit)]
- Social and political life [administrative and territorial units; institutions and functions; socio-cultural life (education, social class, symbols)]

Interesting cues can be taken from Leppihalme's classification (1997) based on three ***types of allusions***. Allusion proper subdivided in proper name allusions and key-phrase allusions, stereotyped allusions, and marginal allusions subdivided in semi-allusive comparisons and eponymous adjectives, (excluding fixed combinations and lexicalised eponyms). As culture-specific, allusions are linked to the metaphor and their abundant occurrence in literary text could be troublesome in translation.

As well as the proposed classifications for the types of realia, also the ***classification*** of their ***translation strategies*** has been intensively explored within TS. Even the term "strategy" was object of many discussions in order to establish its

methodological usability, focusing by turns on the linguistic aspects (how was the linguistic material manipulated from SL to TL – Nida 1964, Chesterman 1997) or on the cognitive aspects (how was the decision-making process applied to overcome transfer problems from SL to TL – Levi 1967). Within the general framework of ***domestication vs foreignization*** or ***losses and gains (compensations)*** binary dynamics, although they are different in form the classifications of strategy types are similar in substance, and traceable to Valhov and Florin's as described above. Finally, on the equivalence concept I prefer Toury's (1995) descriptive view which considers ***equivalence as a given*** based on what can be observed (the relationship between two texts in which the target text is the translation of the source text). Even if criticized as "circular", saying that "equivalence is what it is" (Pym 1997), I agree that what can be observed to be the case counts more than what is theorized to be the case. If perfect or true equivalence is not possible, translation is and does happen all the time, so equivalence has become a "negotiable entity" (Kenny 2011, 97) depending on the context and the specific source and target items involved.

Translation Quality Assessment and Translation Criticism

From the perspective illustrated above, the delicate problem of evaluation also arises either by looking to the close correspondence with the source text, which requires the bilingualism of the critic, or by treating the translated work as part of the target literary system.

Evidently the TS has favoured the second trend, considering that there is no universal or ahistorical criterion for assessing the absolute quality of a translation. It is necessary to take into account the whole set of contingent factors that enter to be part of the translation act: who commissioned the work, for what purpose, in which socio-cultural context, at what historical moment for the receiving culture. Attention moves to the target text, which is the result of a manipulation not only associated to the subjective interpretation of the translator and to the change of the linguistic code, but also to the socio-cultural and historical mentioned factors. However, in 1997 Hatim and Mason observed that "the assessment of translation performance is an activity which, despite being widespread, is under-researched and under-discussed." (199).

Recently, an interesting contribution has been wrought by German researcher Juliane House, who illustrates the TQA approaches of the various TS schools classifying them into three main groups: based on subjective experience and intuitive approach; reader-response approach (Nida's dynamic equivalence); text-based approaches (Wills, Koller, Riess and Vermeer). House's analysis introduces the concept of "overt" and "covert" translation and of "the cultural filter". Even if discussible under certain aspects, these additional concepts can help fixing evaluation methods in a finer manner. These are her definitions:

> An overt translation is required whenever the source text is heavily dependent on the source culture and independent status within it; a

> covert translation is required when neither condition holds, i.e., when the source text is not source culture specific. (House 1998, 199)
> [Cultural filter is] a set of cross-cultural dimensions along which members of the two cultures differ in sociocultural predispositions and communicative preferences. This also make evaluation difficult because it involves assessing the quality of the cultural filters introduced in translation. (House 1998, 199)

For translation criticism the text-based approach appears as the only practicable, critical analysis of the source text and its translatability, followed by compared analysis between SLT and TLT considering the translating strategies and evaluation seems to me the best suitable method. Excluding the first group (intuitive approach, practised by most publishers), the text-based approaches have advantages and disadvantages. I mention here Bruno Osimo's valuable model of translation shifts analysis integrating sets of advantages, constituted by "chronotopical analysis" (realia and intertextuality, deictics, conceptual/ metaphoric words, expressive fields, functional words) and "generic parameters" (generic lexicon, syntax, versification), to be applied /adapted case by case to the literary text under investigation. Since at the moment universal sets of *a priori* evaluation procedures available and applicable to all kind of literary texts does not exists, the only effective way seems to be a flexible adaptable *a posteriori* analysis and evaluation to obtain objective conclusions (or the highest possible objectivity degree).

Conclusions

I therefore agree with Osimo's call for "a reference paradigm to reconcile the descriptive approach to translation studies with the existence of translation criticism and its evaluation in the aforementioned contexts, to overcome the contradiction between a descriptive-only approach and the need to evaluate." (Osimo 2014, Part five, 40). Moreover, Osimo's recent suggestions of the "translation as metaphor" and the "translator as anthropologist", as well as his methodological considerations regarding the need to "re-evaluate translation studies by drawing on anthropology and semiotics, where *translation* is the key notion to define the concept of *culture* itself" appears as pretty stimulating and potentially very fruitful both for translation practice and criticism. (Osimo 2019, 97).

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