Cultural Misrepresentation through Translation

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Abstract

The space of intercultural communication is bound to make translation the *par excellence* site for the negotiation, understanding and/or contestation of the relationships of power and knowledge across cultures. In these intercultural encounters, translation has played a decisive role in the formation and/or deformation of cultural realities through systems, the master discourses, of representing the foreign (other) for the local (self). In the process of translation, a master discourse, the product of a specific cultural context where translation takes place, is used as the medium for the exchange of cultural goods, most importantly literary ones. Drawing on a number of translation instances, this article examines the lack of innocence of translation as the medium of intercultural communication.

Keywords: translation, representation, master discourse, self, other, culture, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Translation, in its academic, professional and anthropological meanings, remains one of the main means through which texts of

one culture are made available in another. On this basis, it should, in theory, be the site of potentially fruitful encounters between different cultures, particularly in the case of translation from those supposedly weaker and subordinate cultures into powerful and dominant ones (Faiq 2004).

Although it has always been recognized that translation involves hybrid sets of activities and problems which, separate in nature and scope, nevertheless interrelate within the process of translating, it was not until the early 1980s that a serious shift of focus and orientation came about. Over the last two decades or so, many "self-conscious and thoughtful theorists and practitioners" (Dingwaney 1995: 3) have stressed that translation, by necessity, involves manipulation and subversion of cultural goods. Of course, within translation studies this shift of focus, from issues of fidelity and equivalence, still shocks traditionalists, who persist in their belief of value-free translation that cannot refer but to the *innocent* transfer of texts from one language to another within the context of an 'unproblematic notion of representation' (Niranjana 1992: 4).

Through translation, the most important cultural good that is prone to misrepresentation and manipulation is literature. Both literature and translation are highly culturally complex and charged and are not as innocent as they appear, or as Coates reminds us, 'Literature is not innocent. Neither is translation" (1996: 215). They both provide prime sites for the study of cultural identity and for manipulated intercultural representations. Literature represents a body of cultural goods that a particular culture sees as its heritage for its own members (self) and as an image for export to members of other cultures (other). Particularly in the latter case, translation assumes a vital role in communicating this body of literature to global constituents. Both literature and translation use a 'lethal weapon' as their medium, namely language. Within this context, the aim of this article is to examine the role of translation in the relaying of 'preformatted' images of cultures through specific representations

based on a prior master discourse of translation, reinforcing hence the 'not-so-innocent' nature of translation.

2. The Master Discourse of Translation

As mentioned earlier, translation studies has witnessed an important shift in the 1980s. In particular, the view of culture-modeling through translation has ushered in questions that cannot be adequately answered by the conventionalized notions of equivalence, accuracy, fidelity, or *sourceer* vs. *targeteer* approaches to translation and translating. The focus has shifted from (un)translatability to the cultural, political and economic ramifications of translation; away from concerns with translated texts (cohesion, etc), toward treating translation as social, cultural and political acts taking place within and attached to global and local relations of power and dominance. It should be noted here that this shift has, not surprisingly, been precipitated by work on orientalism, post-colonial and cultural studies, and by the questioning of the transparent and fluent strategies and practices of representing others, whereby translation

> becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity. The context is one of contested stories attempting to account for, to recount, the asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages (Niranjana 1992: 1).

Niranjana's observation is particularly relevant for the colonial, post-colonial, global, and perhaps post-global contexts where different modes of the media play a major role in the diffusion of cultural representations at often fast speeds.

This examination of the links between translation, including writings about, non-dominant cultures into dominant and hegemonic ones is not entirely new. Referring to translation into German, Rudolf Pannwitz wrote:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from the wrong promise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English, into German, instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, or English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for their language than for the spirit of the foreign languages. The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue (cited in Dingwaney 1995: 7).

Such practices point to basic *flaws* of translation and translators, whereby the foreign is mirrored through the lenses of the translating culture and its language.

Though contemporary translation studies has managed to rid itself, albeit not entirely, of the notions of equivalence, accuracy, fidelity, free vs. literal methods, its emerging sites of intercultural communication are bound, however, to make it the site for the contestation of the spaces between cultures and relationships of power and knowledge. The reason is simple: Translation involves the transporting (carrying-over) of languages and their associated cultures to be recuperated by specific target (receiving) reading constituencies. These constituencies have at their disposal established systems of representation, with norms and conventions for the production and consumption of meanings vis-à-vis people, objects and events. These systems ultimately yield a *master discourse* through which identity and difference are marked and under whose constraints the acts of translating are carried out (Faiq 2007).

In this act of cross-cultural communication, the two fundamental components of translation are culture and language. Because it brings the two together, translation is by necessity a multi-faceted, multi-problematic process with different manifestations, realizations and ramifications. In general terms, culture can be defined as shared knowledge: what the members of a particular community ought to know to act and react in specific almost preformatted ways and interpret their experience, including contact with other cultures, in distinctive ways. Based on religion, social structures, beliefs, values, history and language itself, culture involves the totality of attitudes towards the world, towards events, other cultures and peoples and the manner in which the attitudes are mediated (Fairclough 1995). In other words, culture refers to beliefs and value systems tacitly assumed to be collectively shared by particular social groups and to the positions taken by producers and receivers of texts, including translations, during the mediation process facilitated by language: the system that offers its users the tools to realize their culture. The intrinsic relationship between culture and language is expressed by Bassnett (1998: 81) in the following simple way: "Try as I may, I cannot take language out of culture or culture out of language."   In other words, language and culture represent the two sides of the same coin.

So, intercultural communication involves contact, mostly through language, between two or more different even opposing cultures. On the one hand, this contact takes place in the same culture, between mini cultures, so to speak (feminist and anti-feminist camps, pro- and anti-abortion groups, pro and anti war policies, racist and anti racist views, and many other pro-and-anti groups within the same culture/society). This situation may be defined as *intracultural* communication, whereby the tensions between the differing groups are manifested through different modes of representation and different discourses. Contact between different cultures, as separate nations or societies, on the other hand, is the

prime domain of *intercultural* communication.

While a breakdown in intracultural communication may lead to cracks in a particular culture (society) such as civil wars and civil disobedience, societies tend to unite and often negate or even oppress their internal (intracultural) differences when dealing with external threats from other nations or cultures. In such cases, the *inter* in intercultural communication assumes a particularly important dimension in demarcating difference and yielding a space between 'us' and 'them,' the other.

To capture the delicate nature of intra and inter cultural communication, one may use the structure of onions as a metaphor. An onion (macro culture) is made up of layers (mini cultures of one macro culture) that are carefully segregated by thin (cling-film-like) membranes. In the case of one culture (one onion), any defect (breakdown) in a membrane leads to contact (conflict) between the layers and will lead to damage to the layers (social disorder). Intercultural communication, including translation, on the other hand, may be represented by different onions and their encounters.

While languages are generally prone to change phonologically, morphologically, syntactically and semantically over time, cultures do not change fast. Overall, cultures remain by and large attached to and determined by a past or pasts. In this regard, Edward Said succinctly argues that

> appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions – about influence, about blame and judgment, about present actualities and future priorities (1993: 1).

When cultures (different onions) cross and mingle, pasts clash and a struggle for power and influence becomes inevitable.

Through translation, old formulations and modes of mediation appear on the surface and their realization is made possible by language: the data bank of discursive options. The use of language as discourse is invested with ideologies in the production, circulation and/or challenging of stereotypes or power relationships between communities of the same language or communities with different languages. One may coin *culguage* out of culture and language to capture the intrinsic relationship between the two.

The norms of producing, classifying, interpreting, and circulating texts within the contexts of one *culguage* tend to remain in force when approaching texts transplanted through translation from other *culguages*. As with native texts, the reception process of translated ones is determined more by the shared knowledge of the translating community than by what the translated texts themselves contain (Faiq 2004, Lefevere 1998).

Particularly between civilizationally distant and power-unequally related cultures, intercultural communication demonstrates the need for the interface of many humanities and social sciences disciplines in order to analyse the complex process inherent in such encounters. The complexity stems from the exchange of cultural goods and the carrying-over of specific products (texts) to be recuperated by receivers that have at their disposal an established system of representation with its own norms for production and consumption of such products. This system ultimately evolves into a *master discourse* through which identity similarity and difference are identified, negotiated, accepted and/or resisted. It is through such master discourses that translations 'shine-through' and through which they are diffused. But a master discourse does not necessarily reflect reality. Instead and as Bakhtin argues, the master discourse makes use of language in such a way that a given reality is constructed, "The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone,

organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is a prior discourse" (cited in Conklin 1997: 239). In this regard, recall Said's quote cited above.

Through adherence to the requirements and constraints of a master discourse, self and other (source and target) become situated into ways of representation ingrained in the shared experience and institutional norms of the self's system of representation (master discourse). Otherness is measured according to a scale of possibilities within the master discourse: when the other is feared, the lexical strategies (language) one expects are those that realize hierarchy, subordination and dominance. Otherness can and often does lead to the establishment of stereotypes, which usually come accompanied by existing representations that reinforce the ideas behind them.

In translation, source texts and their associated peoples are transformed from certain specific signs into signs whose typifications translators and others involved in the translation enterprise claim to know. As the antonym of the self (the translating culguage), the other (them, the translated culguage) is used to refer to all that the self perceives as mildly or radically different (Faiq 2007; Morton 2007). Historically, the other and otherness have been feared rather than appreciated with the exception perhaps of the phenomenon of exoticism, where the other, though often misunderstood and misrepresented, is perceived as strange but at the same time strangely 'attractive' (O'Barr 1994). In what follows, instances of the manipulative nature of translation (lack of innocence) are examined.

3. Instances

In our global context, translation, aided by the media and its technologies, yields "enormous power in constructing

representations of foreign cultures" (Venuti 1998: 97). An example of such practices is given by Mason (1994) and used by Venuti (1998) to represent the negative consequences of translation. Mason refers to the April 1990 monthly magazine, *Courier,* published by UNESCO to promote intercultural understanding. In this issue an article appeared in both the Spanish and English editions of the magazine. The article deals with the history of the Mexican peoples. For Mason and Venuti, the problem lies in the English translation, which represents pre-Columbus Mexicans as inferior, for example, 'antiguos mexicanos' (ancient Mexicans) became 'Indians,' with all the negative connotations associated with the term. Accordingly, such a translation represents 'ideological slanting' against a particular people. I would personally posit that the translator/ translators may not have been that aware of the ideological slanting, but worked rather, perhaps unwittingly, within the demands of the master discourse they were brought up with and which formed their frame of reference when dealing with other cultures, in this case the ancient Mexicans. In other words, the constraints and norms of the master discourse of the translating culture and its language (culguage) seemed to have guided the translating process and product.

At the G8 summit in Russia in July 2006, unknown to him that the microphone was still on when he was discussing the armed conflict between Lebanon's Hizbollah and Israel with the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the United States President, George W. Bush, used the four-letter word 'shit' to describe this conflict, which killed hundreds of innocent civilians and forced thousands of Lebanon-loving Westerners to flee the country. Mr. Bush's choice of word fits a specific master discourse of representation. What is at stake here is that the USA, and by extension most Western societies, generally represent and translate the Middle East according to fixed discursive strategies. Recent history shows how Africans, Arabs, Muslims and Israelis as well as

Central and Eastern Europeans are seen as trouble-makers and sources of nuisance for the Western world, which finds itself, time and again, having to intervene to solve their problems and bickering (Faiq 2007).

Regarding the choice of terms to describe other cultures and/or concepts in the American culture and perhaps by extension Western cultures, Jim Garamone (2006) of the American Forces Press Service, reporting on a study by Dr. Douglas E. Streusand and Army Lt. Col. Harry D. Tunnell IV of the National Defense University at Fort Lesley J. McNair in Washington, D.C., noted that "in the war of words we [USA] unwittingly give the advantage to the enemy." Particularly when dealing with Islamic cultures

> American leaders misuse language to such a degree that they unintentionally wind up promoting the ideology of the groups the United States is fighting. A case in point is the term "jihadist". Many leaders use the term jihadist or jihadi as a synonym for Islamic extremist. Jihad has been commonly adapted in English as meaning "holy war". But to Muslims it means much more. [Jihad] literally means striving and generally occurs as part of the expression 'jihad fi sabil illah,' striving in the path of God. Calling our enemies jihadis and their movement a global jihad thus indicates that we recognize their doctrines and actions as being in the path of God and, for Muslims, legitimate. By countering jihadis, the West and moderate Muslims are enemies of true Islam.

This example indicates how a master discourse, which exists prior to any translating/representing act, guides the outcome of intercultural encounters and often leads to mistranslations (misrepresentations) that may have serious consequences.

Another instance of such practices in translation into English is

given by Venuti (2005) regarding the translation of *ricotta* from Italian into American English by William Weaver in 1968. The Italian term is used in its source as an analogy to signify imaginary features of the moon and interstellar matter. The English translation "suppresses the cultural specificity" of the term through the use of familiar 'equivalents' to the English Language readers. Such equivalents include *cheese* and *cream* that significantly assimilate the cultural references of the Italian to familiar references of the receiving target readership, thereby 'killing' the semiotic specificity of the source.

In an article on the translation of Shakespeare into Arabic, Amin-Zaki (1995) discusses a process of cleansing of source texts so as not to 'offend' Muslim readers of Shakespeare in Arabic. Frequent 'bawdy and blasphemous' language, including oaths, have gone through a cultural screening to fit the master discourse of Arabic to the point where Shakespeare is almost 'islamized.'

In translation from Arabic, as another instance, cultural encounters between Arabic, and by extension almost all that relates to Islam, through translation into mainstream Western languages, have been characterized by strategies of manipulation, subversion and appropriation, with cultural conflicts being the ultimate outcome. Such strategies have hardened since the events of September 2001 in the USA. The media have played a major role in the rapid diffusion of subverted translations and coverage of this world – suffocating the diversity and heterogeneity of the different Arab and Muslim cultures; portraying them instead as a monolith, a homogeneous group and forming a specific cultural identity that creates an otherness of absolute strangers, who need to be isolated, avoided and even abominated, negating thus possibilities of *tertium comparationis* and ethical translatability.

Translation from Arabic has generally suffered from influences of the master discourses of the translating cultures in terms of invisibility, appropriation, subversion, and manipulation. Such a

situation not only distorts original texts but also leads to the influencing of target readers. Carbonell (1996), for example, reports that in his comments on Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, Byron Farwell (1963/1990: 366) wrote:

> The great charm of Burton's translation, viewed as literature, lies in the veil of romance and exoticism he cast over the entire work. He tried hard to retain the flavour of oriental quaintness and naivete of the medieval Arab by writing as the Arab would have written in English (in Carbonell 1996: 80).

Such views of translation and by extension of readers, lead to translations that imply the production of subverted texts at all levels, "not only the source text, but also the target context experience the alteration infused by the translation process when their deeper implications are thus revealed" (93). This alteration ultimately leads to manipulations of the target text through the process of translation, thus, regulating and/or satisfying and agreeing with the expected response of and/or sought from the receivers of the translations given the pressures of the master discourse through which Arab and Islamic culture(s) are perceived prior to the translation activity itself.

Reporting on personal experience of translating contemporary Arabic literature into English, Peter Clark writes:

> I wanted to translate a volume of contemporary Syrian literature. I thought the work of 'Abd al-Salam al-'Ujaili was very good and well worth putting into English. 'Ujaili is a doctor in his seventies who has written poetry, criticism, novels and short stories. In particular his short stories are outstanding. Many are located in the Euphrates valley and depict the tensions of individuals coping with politicisation and the omnipotent state. I proposed to my British publisher

a volume of 'Ujaili's short stories. The editor said, "There are three things wrong with the idea. He's male. He's old and he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?" Well, I looked into women's literature and did translate a novel by a woman writer even though she was and is in her eighties (1997: 109).

This account shows that translation from Arabic into mainstream European languages is essentially still seen as an exotic voyage carried out through a weighty component of representation in the target culture, in which the objective knowledge of the source culture is substantially altered by a dialectic of attraction and repulsion. The *Arabian Nights* (a title preferred for its exotic and salacious resonance to the original *A Thousand and One Nights*), for instance, is more famous in the West than in the Arab East. The exotic, and often distorted, view of the Arab and Islamic worlds has led to a situation where the proportion of books written about this world in Western languages is greatly disproportionate to the small number of books translated from Arabic; a situation that may have contributed to the low status of translation in the Arab world (Faiq 2000). Available statistics show that of all translations worldwide for the years 1982, 1983 and 1984, translations from Arabic into English were 298, 322 and 536 respectively. Compared with translations from Spanish or Hungarian or even Classical Greek and Latin, one can easily notice the insignificance of the number of translations from Arabic. Translations from these three sources were 715, 847, 839; 703, 665, 679; and 839, 1116, 1035; for the three years respectively (Venuti 1995).

For all the major world literatures, Arabic remains relatively unknown and unread in the West, for reasons that are unique, even remarkable, at a time when tastes here for the non-European are more developed than ever before and, even

> more compelling, contemporary Arabic literature is at a
> particularly interesting juncture (Said 1995: 97).

Said's point sums up the state of translational literary traffic from
Arabic. Despite interesting junctures and despite excellent literary
works and a Nobel Prize in literature (awarded to the Egyptian
writer Naguib Mahfouz in 1988), there seems to be a general
'embargo' on Arabic literature except for texts that reiterate the
usual clichés about 'Islam, violence, sensuality, and so forth' (99).
In the discourse of translation, the Arab/Islamic world has become a
homogeneous sign (Guardi 2006). This in turn ultimately leads to
the conclusion that translation also becomes the site of conflictual
relationships of power and struggle between the cultures being
translated and those doing the translating, with potentially dire
consequences and accusations and counter accusations of
misrepresentation and subversion. Events the first few years of the
new century so far, particularly after 11 September 2001, attest to
this. These years have seen an unprecedented use and abuse of
stereotypes of Arabs and Islam. The same old story has been
repeated over and over again, often with damaging consequences,
injecting the pressures of the existing master discourse with more
potency, often deadly. But this has also led to the rise of counter
(anti-) discourses in the translated culture.

4. Conclusion

Starting from the premise that translation and translating deal
with the conditions of knowledge production in one culture, and the
way this knowledge is interpreted and relocated according to
knowledge production in another culture, it is not too difficult to
lament the situation of intercultural translation, in general. In this
regard, Bassnett & Trivedi (1999: 2) write:

> [T]ranslation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a
> continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing
> process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a
> highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages
> in the process of transfer across linguistic and cultural
> boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent
> activity but is highly charged with signification at every
> stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality
> between texts, authors or systems.

This situation highlights the far-reaching ramifications as well as the complexities inherent in the act of translation.

The cultural dimensions of translation and the master discourse that underlies its activity generally lead to the reconstruction of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that pre-exist translation in the target culture in the form of a master discourse. By definition, a master discourse is configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality and determines the production, circulation, and reception of texts, whereby

> Translation can be described as an act of violence against a
> nation only because nationalist thinking tends to be
> premised on a metaphysical concept of identity as a
> homogeneous essence, usually given a biological grounding
> in an ethnicity or race and seen as manifested in a particular
> language and culture (Venuti 2005: 177).

This violence is realized by the application of the norms of the master discourse of translation, which also stands for the 'specific culture' of translation.

A better understanding of the ways in which discourses operate might contribute to more efficient self-monitoring on the part of producers of master discourses, and might lead to making translation

a true process of intercultural understanding rather than reinforcing existing representations and images of one culture to and for another. This can be achieved through a cross-cultural appraisal of the discourses underlying translation and translating with a view to better understanding the issues of identity (self and other), the translation enterprise (patronage, agencies, translators) and norms and pressures of representation (the master discourse). If we are to examine the process of intercultural communication through translation, we ought to carefully consider the culture of doing translation as it ultimately informs and shapes the translation of culture. An ethical negotiation of the master discourse of translation may lead to a celebration of cultural differences particularly through translation, otherwise and as Bermann (2005: 7) writes that

> without more refined and sensitive cultural/linguistic translations and, above all, without an education that draws attention to the very *act* of translation and to the interwoven, problematic otherness that it confronts, *our global world will be less hospitable; in fact, it could founder* (emphasis added).

The current situation of translation from non-dominant *culguages* into dominant ones and the state of intercultural representations (terrorism, etc), sadly indicate that translation cannot be innocent, neither can its culture (master discourse).

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