
ON BECOMING CULTURAL TRANSLATION

*Lucía Aranda
University of Hawaii, USA
laranda@hawaii.edu*

Translation is much more than the linguistic transference between two languages: it is a cultural activity, rich in choices and consequences. Literature reflects the art and culture of a time and is fueled by translation. By examining which works are translated and the manner of their translation, postcolonial translation offers a framework through which to study their influence on national and world literatures, identities and ideologies. This paper examines the concept of nontranslatability, the original, and the relevance of translation as both an artistic and a political act. Translation is a metaphor for power relations in which culture, not the word, sentence or text is the unit of translation.

Key words: Translation, postcolonial translation, culture, ideology

La traducción es mucho más que la transferencia lingüística entre dos idiomas: es una actividad cultural, rica en toma de decisiones y consecuencias. La literatura refleja el arte y la cultura de una época dada y se alimenta de la traducción. Al examinar qué obras se traducen y la manera de traducirlas, la traducción postcolonial ofrece un marco a través del cual se puede estudiar cómo han influido dichas traducciones sobre las literaturas nacionales y mundiales, las identidades y las ideologías. Este trabajo examina el concepto de la no-traducción, el original y la relevancia de la traducción como un acto artístico y político. La traducción es una

metáfora de las relaciones de poder en la que la cultura es la unidad de traducción, y no la palabra, la frase o el texto.

Palabras clave: Traducción, traducción postcolonial, cultura, ideología

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased interest in translation as a way to understand the changing relations of multicultural globalized spaces. Interdisciplinary in nature and paralleling Cultural Studies, Translation Studies has taken center stage and has, in fact, become a metaphor for power relations. The “translational transnational” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 173) looks to the esthetics and ethics of multiculturalism of the West as the other (i.e. the Third World) rewrites it. Set in a postcolonial framework, postcolonial translation attempts to understand how language and literature (i.e. culture) reformulate national identities in translation. The following study focuses on the power of translation by examining the issues related to nontranslatability and what is understood by an original text. Specific examples illustrate the politics of translation and, more specifically, the manner in which the practice of translation can lead to certain ideologies.

2. Translation and Nontranslatability

Theories of translatability and nontranslatability are related to the relationship between language, meaning, and thought processes. If meaning is universal, any text can be rendered into another language. However, the theories which deal with the influence of language on thought process are divided: on the one hand, if thought is determined by language (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), then translation is problematic; on the other, there are those for whom language produces such a distinct worldview that translation is deemed impossible. Thus the notion of translation is referred to not only as a grammatical activity but a cultural one as well. Clearly, the closer the languages and the closer the meaning, the more straightforward the translation process. While “equivalence may shift up and down the rank scale” (Catford, 2004), at the phonetic, lexical or syntactical levels, issues of

untranslatability become more critical at cultural and functional crossings and, of course, at higher level linguistic moments, such as irony, puns, allusions, palindromes, onomatopoeia, or even rhyme. The process of translation involves a layering of meaning and adjustment to make the untranslatable translatable. As Venuti (2008) explains: “The structural differences between languages, including those that bear significant lexical and syntactical resemblances, require the translator variously to dismantle, rearrange, and finally displace the linguistic features of the source text.”

But what are translators to do with the cultural references which are in diametrical opposition in the source and target languages? Such is the case of the *west wind* of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” considered favorable in England but whose equivalent is the *east wind* in China, or the seeming functional untranslatability of a sentence such as “The first word in the sentence has three letters” as it is translated into Spanish, Italian or French (Pym, 2007). Spitzer’s custom of not translating the quotations in his work, like many of his fellow European scholars, would seem to indicate untranslatability as a given. In his 1948 essay “Linguistics and literary theory,” Spitzer explains that:

The frequent occurrence, in my text, of quotations in the original foreign language (or languages) may prove a difficulty for the English reader. But since it is my purpose to take the word (and the wording) of the poets seriously, and since the convincingness and rigor of my stylistic conclusions depends entirely upon the minute linguistic detail of the original texts, it was impossible to offer translations (as cited in Apter, 2006, p. 61).

The issue of translatability and nontranslatability lies deep in theories of translation as it reveals both the singularity of texts and the universality of language. It is an issue which articulates concerns of equivalency (for instance, cultural), loss in translation (for instance, in poetry), and the manner in which discourses are privileged (for instance, English over Hindi). This untranslatability/translatability dilemma, so intrinsic to Translation Studies, is now being considered somewhat differently, in part as technology, the internet, and globalization are applied

to translation. And so, while each text is unique and untranslatable, “translation studies increasingly explores the possibility that everything is translatable” (Apter, 2006, p. 226).

3. Source Text or Original?

A key issue in postcolonial translation is defining what is meant by the original text. While source texts are also referred to as originals, these must be understood as a point of departure. To quote Paz’s famous lines about the inexistence of an original text:

Cada uno ligeramente distinto del anterior: traducciones de traducciones de traducciones. Cada texto es único y, simultáneamente, es la traducción de otro texto. Ningún texto es enteramente original, porque el lenguaje mismo, en su esencia, es ya una traducción: primero del mundo no-verbal, y después, porque cada signo y cada frase es la traducción de otro signo y de otra frase (Paz, 1971, p. 9).¹

As Pym (2007) points out, in the Middle Ages translations were seen as a source of intellectual wealth (another issue is the fact that they were mostly vertical translations, i.e. texts from ‘higher’ cultures translated into languages of ‘lower’ cultures). Mukherjee (2005) explains that in Indian literature originality was not a “necessary criteria” and in oral literatures, such as the Native American, narratives were meant to be elaborated.

In the short story “Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*,” Borges explores the intricate nature of authorship and translation. As Borges reviews the fictitious Menard’s translation of the *Quixote*, he calls attention to the inevitable response of the reader in the literary process, and he argues that Menard’s almost exact translation was “more subtle” because as a translator he was able to enrich the text with allusions that post-date the publication of Cervantes’ work:

Ser, de alguna manera, Cervantes y llegar al Quijote le pareció menos arduo –por consiguiente, menos interesante– que seguir siendo Pierre Menard y

llegar al Quijote, a través de las experiencias de Pierre Menard... No en vano han transcurrido trescientos años, cargados de complejísimos hechos. Entre ellos, para mencionar uno solo: el mismo Quijote (Borges, 2003, p. 58).²

Most critics refer to this fictional essay as an intellectual exercise used by Borges to recover after a serious head injury; however, one cannot help but wonder if the fact that Borges first read *El Quijote* in translation was at all a factor. In his “Autobiographical essay” Borges (1970, p. 209) confesses that in comparison he felt the original Spanish “sounded like a bad translation.” This anecdote (not totally incidental considering the literary force of Cervantes and Borges) readily illustrates the impact of a text on a reader and the ambivalence of what constitutes an original. It follows then that even as translations reformulate language, a source text (e.g. Faulkner’s stream-of-consciousness eliminated in a Spanish translation) or a target language (e.g. the indigenous cultures of Latin America) can in effect become an original.

4. The Politics of Translation

4.1. Postcolonial Translation

Central to postcolonial translation is bringing to the forefront the role of translation as a tool of domination by empires, first politically and now economically. In the unequal power relationships created in colonial situations, language was used to conquer, and translation became one of the mediums by which the other was altered. For Cheyfitz (1991, 112) “from its beginnings the imperialist mission is...one of translation: the translation of the ‘other’ into the terms of the empire.” Already conscious of the power of language in the 16th century, and in reference to the Reconquest of Granada, Antonio de Nebrija wrote in the prologue to his *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (the first grammar of a vernacular language ever published), how intrinsically language goes hand in hand with empires (“siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio”).

Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Caribbean were colonized by European powers; in fact, by the end of World War I, almost 85% of the earth was or had been a colony (Fieldhouse, 1989, p. 373 in Loomba, 2005, p. 3). In the process of translation, the other was rewritten in the image of the empire and the copy, as it was compared to the original, became second-rate. As translation has always been equated to a copy and copies are most often regarded as inferior to the original, translation has been considered a negative metaphor: Cervantes called translation the backside of a tapestry and Virginia Woolf said that reading a translation could be like wearing the wrong pair of glasses.

Postcolonial translation has brought to light how translation into the imperial languages –Spanish in the 15th and 16th centuries or English in the 18th and 19th centuries– has left its mark on the philosophical and cultural discourse of the colonies, so-called quasi-copies of the originals. The unequal relations produced by translation create a power play which alters ideology and identity. Niranjana (1992, p. 2) points out how the use of notes and prefaces in the English translation of colonial Indian texts excluded the colonized from his/her own history “to justify cultural domination.” Niranjana continues:

Translation thus produces strategies of containment. By employing certain modes of representing the other –which it thereby also brings into being– translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, helping them acquire the status of what Edward Said calls representations, or objects without history. These become *facts* exerting a force on events in the colony: witness Thomas Babington Macaulay’s 1835 dismissal of indigenous Indian learning as outdated and irrelevant, which prepared the way for the introduction of English education (1992, p. 3).

Postcolonial translation is a radical act of translation, committed to cultural differences and driven by the political need to disseminate these differences through language and text selection. Spivak, a centrifugal force in postcolonial translation, is committed so that the differences of the subaltern, third world minority literature do not disappear in translation. Just as her well-known translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*

includes a translator's prefaces, her translations of the Indian activist Mahasweta Devi (such as *Imaginary Maps* or *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*) from Bengali into English include a translator's foreword, notes and an afterword. Spivak's translation project strives to counter the discourse silencing the subaltern identity, for example by including the Bengali sayings that were omitted in earlier translations.

Because Spivak understands that “[t]ranslation is as much a problem as a solution” (2005, p. 95), this influential postcolonial theorist and scholar advocates for responsibility in translation. For Spivak, a translator should grasp a “writer's presuppositions” and find an ethical translatorial solution so that what have become marginalized discourses do not disappear in translation. This is an emphasis born from a holistic consideration of viewing culture as the unit of translation and not the word, sentence or text.

4.2. The Practice of Translation

The role of translation in the formation of canons has received widespread attention from postcolonial translation theorists. Literature reflects the art and culture of a time, and a look at whose work is selected for translation and how the work translates can shed light on the practice of translation and its influence on national and world literatures.

While there is no doubt that literature is fueled by translation, an imbalance in the publication of translations parallels the power relations between languages (or countries) and points to how the other is rewritten in the image of the empire. In China, for instance, there are calls to reshape the literary canon in light of the manipulation by translations of foreign texts (Yifeng, 2008). In India, the hegemony of Western literature set in motion an Orientalist interpretation of itself. Niranjana (1992, p. 13) cites a 1984 Indian preface in which the editor still urges his fellow countrymen to “try to preserve accurately and interpret the national heritage by treading the path chalked out by Sir William Jones” –the same William Jones who said the “besotted” Hindus were “incapable of civil liberty” and needed to be “ruled by an absolute power.” This hierarchy of languages has meant that in spite of India historically being the locus of translations between vernaculars

(*bhasha*), today these are via English (Ganguly, 2004).

It is interesting to note the quasi-erasure of the translatorial activity of the Jews and Arabs coexisting in Spain's cultural memory. According to Catelli and Gargatagli (1998, p. 15), the few written references to the feverous translation activity which took place from Arabic into Spanish belies a past that bridges back only to classical Greece and Rome— a void which puts Spain's past in line with that of the rest of Europe.

Universal literature gains when national literatures are translated; however, literary language can gain or lose in translation (Damrosch, 2003). How and in what degree translations are appropriated takes on more significance as the historical practice of translation is examined and light is shed on the asymmetries involved. A case in point is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is considered one of the most important texts in English today; however, because of the difficulty of its translation it has had fewer international readers and much less impact than *Dubliners*, a text with greater translatability and therefore a larger readership (Damrosch, 2003, p. 289).

At another level, Borges' case exemplifies consequences of translation practices: Borges was well aware of the influence he wielded when he chose which texts to translate into Spanish as they frequently became reference points in Argentine culture (such as with his translation of Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*). Venuti (1998) writes specifically of the power wielded by literary agents, who as readers and decision makers, will include and exclude values and beliefs as they select texts and influence the manner of their translation. More powerful still are corporations, which make the ultimate decision on which texts (and languages) are to be translated and how. It is not surprising to realize how instrumental the printing press was in generating translations: 17th century England was much taken by Spanish chronicles of the New World (Garcés, 2006, p. 204).

The power imbalance in translation is not only problematic because of the grids imposed on a culture (Lefevere, 1999) but also because of the insularity produced by the lack of other cultures. At the beginning of 2008, an article comparing translation statistics in the United States and Spain

appeared in *El País*. According to its author, Rodríguez Rivero, while in 2006, 28.2% of books published in Spain were translations, in the United States the figure was only 3.85%. Similarly, an article by Venuti published in *Words Without Borders* that same year states that between the United States and the United Kingdom, only 2% of the total annual book output was a translation. Venuti cautions how this is forming “aggressively monolingual readerships in the US and the UK.” Christensen (2007) goes so far as to contend that the US market would do well to challenge readers to foreign words.

There are myriad reasons for the lack of a mainstream translation culture in the United States and these range from the historical need to solidify identities, to the distance between the cultures involved in translation. Kutzinski theorizes that the relatively few translations published in the United States in the 1940s were due to an ongoing effort to strengthen the US post-war identity. He cites a senior editor at Knopf, Herbert Weinstock, who explained that he was refusing to publish another of Langston Hughes’ translation of Nicolás Guillén’s work because “for most people in this country, Latin America and its history simply do not exist” (Kutzinski, 2004, p. 116). Hughes, himself aware of the power of publishing practices, was adamant about not alienating African-American readers and demanded the editor place the less controversial “Don’t Know No English” (“Tú no sabe inglés”) before “Last Night Somebody Called Me Negro” (“Aye’”), which addresses the issue of race.

5. Ideology in Translation

It has been the norm historically to privilege fluency in translations. In the name of fluency, from ancient times to today’s translation practices, the culture and the language of source texts have been transformed for effortless access by a new readership. The Romans, for example, translated Greek works and made them their own by substituting the author’s name for that of the translator’s and by Romanizing Greek cultural references. For Venuti (1995, 2) “By producing the illusion of transparency, a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values,

reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey.”

Some of these ‘transformations’ or reformulations in fact function as censorship. This is the case of homosexual love being rewritten as heterosexual in one of Shakespeare’s sonnets into Hebrew; another example is Agustín Aicart’s 1829 translation of Walter Scott’s poem “The Vision of Don Roderick” (“La visión de don Rodrigo”) in whose preface he blatantly writes that “Walter Sccoth [sic] es escocés y escribe principalmente para los ingleses: Yo soy católico y español y escribo principalmente para los españoles”³ (in Santoyo, 1996, p. 41). An often cited case is Edward Lane’s translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* in which he confesses to having eliminated what he considers “inappropriate” or “coarse.” Literary translations abound in examples of this type.

Fluency can negatively impact the source text as it erases its most outstanding elements, deforming the target text ideologically or in a number of other ways. Nevertheless, many writers who also translate, such as Ezra Pound, Jorge Luis Borges or Octavio Paz, see fluency as one approach to creating a similar impact in the target audience. Pound felt “more sense and less syntax...might be a relief,” Borges eliminated or added colloquialisms where he thought best, and Paz’s decision to eliminate certain heretic elements in Donne’s “Elegy XIX” can be considered a manipulation of the original according to Rodríguez García (2004, p. 14). As Damrosch (2003, p. 295) points out, the openness to recognizing that translations are in fact translations allows for greater freedom. The fashion which did not care for translated texts or stating that they were meant that translators had to hide the cultural or historical distance between the source text and the readers of the target text. Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of *Rubáiyat of Omar Kháyyám* is a well-known example. Somewhat egregious is Fitzgerald’s infamous statement that “it is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who, (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions and who really do want a little Art to shape them” (in Bassnett, 1991, p. 18).

It has only been recently that translations have become more accepted texts. Globalization has opened the doors to translations and

stripped them of some of their alienating foreignness (e.g. translators' names now more regularly appear on the front cover of books). The ubiquity of the foreign invites explanations so that notes and prefaces are more commonplace. But clarification has not always been the intention of the translator/publisher. The translation of classical Greek plays into modern languages is often used to discuss just how a text should be translated; specifically, the irony from the references and allusions only known by experts today. Although the literal/free debate has been ongoing since Cicero, Schleiermacher's words written in the early 19th century seem to reverberate best among translation theorists: "Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader towards the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer towards the reader" (1992, p. 42).

The domestication/foreignization dichotomy Schleiermacher alludes to and which Venuti has written so extensively on (1995, 1998) is central to the issue of translation, and especially so when it causes ideologies to point in one direction or another. In the introduction to *Postcolonial Translation* (1999), its editors Bassnett and Trivedi refer to an Indian translation into English whose references to sweating in an amorous situation were eliminated, probably because an English audience would find the behavior unbecoming although it had positive connotations in the original. This domestication not only supposes the erasure of a culture but its substitution by another, with an alternate ideology.

The consequences of domestication are manifold: it is true ideologies may be superimposed, but it is also true others remain unknown in domestication. The translation strategies adopted for two Chinese poets will help illustrate this strategy: although Du Fu is supposedly a more accomplished poet, he is not as well known in English as Li Bai (or Li Bo) because while the work of the former has been translated (by Kenneth Rexroth) with extensive notes and annotations, Li Bai's translations (by Burton Watson) are easier to read, devoid as they are of cultural allusions English speakers do not know (Christensen, 2007).

If domestication eliminates the other in translation and can deform the target culture (Berman, 2000), foreignization allows the foreign to come

through and admittedly calls attention to the fact that the text is a translation. Among the strategies involved in foreignization are the retention of mechanical features; for example, Thomas Colchie's English version of *El beso de la mujer araña* (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*) uses Spanish hyphens to indicate dialogue instead of the English quotation marks; and Mukherjee does not translate Bangla address forms into Hindi in spite of the cultural proximity "to remind the reader" that they are reading a translation.

According to Nabokov, who believed source texts should be seen, literal translations, even if clumsy, are superior to the most beautiful paraphrase. His translation of Pushkin's *Onegin* (1964, revised 1975) is a case in point: considering former versions a betrayal of the original, he took a much more literal approach. The reception of Nabokov's almost verbatim translation is famous: from utter praise to hostile indignation. Nabokov's translation project included copious notes as well as a great number of commentaries on his translatorial approach (his original translation was four volumes long) in the hope of revealing the true nature of the culture and linguistic nuances of Russian. In the foreword and numerous articles (e.g. in *The New Yorker* (1955), *The Partisan Review* (1955), *Esquire* (1963), *The New York Review of Books* (1964), *Encounter* (1966)), Nabokov wrote on his translation strategy and defended his approach as essential for the integrity of the original to be seen and the origins to be revealed.

Increasingly, the taste for foreignizing translations seems to reflect globalization and multilingualism. Even as some consider it an alienating or minoritizing strategy, others believe it reveals the foreignness of the text (Berman, 2000, p. 286) and promotes the understanding of cultural differences (Venuti, 1998, p. 11). Likewise, post-colonial translators consider foreignization a viable strategy against the cultural and linguistic imperialism of Anglo-America. In Venuti's opinion: "Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations" (1995, p. 20).

6. Dialect: a Voice in Translation

A subtle but difficult translation project is unearthing the correspondence of a voice to bring out the foreign in the target language. I am not referring only to the variations across countries, but also to those dialectal variations that stem from the social, racial and historical attitudes which make up an identity. Literary writers use dialects (sociolects, ideolects, etc.) in a variety of ways and for different purposes. Venuti (1998, p. 13), for example, who describes the Italian I.U. Trachetti's use of dialect as an attempt "to unsettle the standard Tuscan dialect by using it to write in marginal literary genres," chose to translate some of the 19th century Italian writer's works in what he calls the Gothic and other works with archaisms. Christensen (2007), in turn, explains he actually invented a *patois* (a mix of southern drawl and an urban slang) for a story by Salarué.

It can be quite daunting to find an adequate geographical translation for a dialect knowing that the reactions of the readers to the voice are as distant as their origins and experiences, such as an Andalusian accent from the south of Spain all too frequently rendered as a southern US drawl. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the impact on the reader who is either unaware of the source culture/ideology or is incapable of believing the new translated version. In India, dialectal variations have multiple functions as they are used "to create character, to evoke a milieu, to underline social differences, sometimes to produce comic effects" (Mukherjee, 2005).

Langston Hughes had his own problems as he embarked on finding the most appropriate voice for Nicolás Guillén's *Motivos* in English. Firstly, was the fact that the original *criollo* and its closest equivalent, American Black English, had not evolved in a similar fashion nor did they have the same weight in their communities. Secondly, American Negro dialect was still not considered a viable vehicle of expression for the African American experience, although Modernist poets such as Pound, Eliot or Williams were using the dialect, albeit for exotic effect. As Kutzinski explains: "Whatever Negro dialect signified to different groups of domestic readers, it was something eminently recognizable to all of them –for better or for worse" (2004, p. 124). Guillén himself reflected on voices of the two Black worlds:

"sin ser el son igual al blues ni existir semejanza entre Cuba y el Sur de los Estados Unidos, es a mi juicio una forma adecuada para lograr poemas vernáculos, acaso porque esa es también actualmente nuestra música representativa" (as cited in Kutzinski, 2004, p. 141).⁴ The fact that Hughes struggled with the translation of the term *negro* itself is indicative of the challenges involved in translation. He and his co-translator, Carruthures, would decide to use *Black*, discarding *Darky* and the highly charged *Nigger*.

7. Conclusion

Inherent to cultural translation is the view that translation is an activity actively engaged in responsibility, from the lone lexical items and the significance of choosing one translatorial strategy over another, to comprehending the translation practices of publishing houses; it is a commitment to cultural differences and the dissemination of these not only through language but also through text selection. Set within the framework of today's globalized, internet-ready society, translation is understood to be a metaphor of power relations effectively positioned by the hierarchy of languages. Simultaneously, the inevitable layering inherent in multiculturalism has shifted the nontranslatability/translatability dilemma, reevaluating definitions of an original, and giving way to the view that translation is always possible. More than grammatical considerations, translators' comments, or a comparison between literatures, translation has come to inhabit a space that supports introspection. Literature is important as cultural memory and the role of translation in its formation cannot and should not be overlooked.

Notes

¹ “Each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation— first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase” (trans. Irene del Corral) (Paz, 1992, p. 154).

² “To be, in some way, Cervantes and reach the Quixote seemed less arduous to him and, consequently, less interesting than to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard... It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst them, to mention only one, is the Quixote itself” (trans. James E. Irby) (Borges, 1964, p. 40).

³ “Walter Sccoth [sic] is Scottish and writes primarily for the English: I am Catholic and Spanish, and I write primarily for the Spanish.”

⁴ “[W]ithout either the *son* being equal to the blues, or even Cuba and the South of the United States being similar places, the *son*, in my view, is an appropriate form in which to write vernacular poems, perhaps because it is also, in fact, our most representative music” (Kutzinski, 2004).

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