

Translating as a cross-cultural
act – a cultural approach

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Recent studies (cf. Bassnett 1980/1991; Snell-Hornby 1988; Vermeer 1989/2004) have shown that the translation process can no longer be seen as being merely between **two linguistic systems**. It is, however, envisaged as being between **two cultures**. In this regard, Snell-Hornby (1988: 46), echoing Vermeer's (1986) views, holds that translation is “a cross-cultural transfer, and the translator should be bicultural, if not pluricultural”.

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This goes in line with Bassnett's (1998: 93) claim:

Translation never takes place in a vacuum; it always happens in a continuum, and the context in which the translation takes place necessarily affects how the translation is made. Just as the norms and constraints of the source culture play their part in the creation of the source text, so the norms and conventions of the target culture play their inevitable role in the creation of the translation.

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Culture is defined by Nida (1964: 157) as “the total beliefs and practices of a society. Words only have meaning in terms of the culture in which they are used, and although languages do not determine culture, they certainly tend to reflect a society's beliefs and practices”. Culture is not “a material phenomenon”, consisting of “things, people, behavior, or emotion” (Goodenough 1964: 39–40).

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Rather, it is

an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say and do, their social arrangements and events, are products or by-products of their culture as they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances (ibid: 39–40).

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Katan (1999: 26), however, defines culture as a “shared mental model or map” for interpreting reality and organizing experience of the world. This model of the world, according to him, is a “system of congruent and interrelated beliefs, values, strategies and cognitive environments which guide the shared basis of behavior” (ibid). Transferring a text from one language to another will not be without difficulties, in particular when SL people and TT people conceptualize their experiences of the world in a different way.

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Nida and Reyburn (1981: 2) hold that the difficulties that arise out of cultural differences **“constitute the most serious problem for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers”**. These cultural differences will definitely slow down translators’ progress while rendering the text at hand. This is because translating a text full of cultural expressions is not simply a matter of substitution of lexical items and structures in the ST with TT ones, although this type of interchange may be possible in certain circumstances.

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Avoiding certain taboos, reconciling cultural clashes, satisfying certain cultural preferences and so on show how translators suffer while finalizing the draft of the TT (Mazid 2007: 39). Such cultural asymmetries place extra efforts on the translators, requiring them to probe the “deep/symbolic level [...] of the source language” in order to “capture the cultural implications meant by the source author” (Al-Masri 2004: 112). To this end, these cultural issues need be dealt with from “the perspective of **cultural insider**” (ibid: 112).

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The term 'insider' or 'emic' as opposed to 'outsider' or 'etic' were first introduced by linguist Kenneth Pike (1954). These two terms 'etic', derived from phonetic and 'emic', derived from phonemic, were created as a response to the “need to include nonverbal behavior in linguistic description”. Anderson (2003: 391) highlights the importance of taking into account both the 'etics', i.e. the superficial level of the language and 'emics', i.e. the symbolic level of the language while dealing with the text at hand.

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To reflect such a symbolic level of language, translators adopt different local strategies. By way of illustration, let us consider the following example quoted from Mahfouz's (1961: 8; emphasis added) ' اللص والكلاب The Thief and the Dogs' and translated by Le Gassick and Badawi (1984: 14):

ألم أعلمك الوقوف على قدمين؟

It was me, wasn't it, who taught you to stand on your own feet.

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Here, the translators, being influenced by such a cultural constraint imposed on them by the expression الوقوف على القدمين 'lit. standing on two feet' have opted for a literal strategy. One can argue that the translators have succeeded in being insiders in the source culture, i.e. understanding the cultural experience in the SL. However, the expression 'to stand on your own two feet' has a number of different meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. In such a context, it does not refer to the physical activity of standing on two feet, rather, it is used figuratively – it simply refers to teaching somebody how to depend on his/herself (cf. Abdel-Hafiz 2003: 231).

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However, at many times, the translator fails to be an insider in the TL culture because of his/her over familiarity with the ST expression. In this regard, Al-Masri (2004: 140–41) rightly comments:

The translator might sometimes fall into the trap of being a **'cognitive blinder'**. That is, when the translator's over familiarity with the source language leads him to assume/presuppose the target readers' familiarity with what they read [...]. In other words, this makes the translator blind to what could be marked to target readers.

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As such, one can conclude that the translator should be an insider in both source language culture (SLC) and target language culture (TLC) while dealing with culture-bound expressions. In other words, s/he should be an insider in the source culture using his/her knowledge to understand the SL culture-bound expression on the one hand, and being an insider in the target culture to record such an experience of the world in the TL.

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Let us consider the following rendition offered by Le Gassick and Badawi (1984: 17) to the following extract quoted from Mahfouz's (1961: 11) novel ' اللص والكلاب The Thief and the Dogs':

اسكت يا ابن الثعلب.

Shut up, you cunning bastard.

Here, the translators have succeeded in being insiders in both the SLC and TLC. In general, the translation of swearing is not an easy task as it “(a) refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatised in the culture; (b) should not be interpreted literally; [and] (c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes” (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 53).

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To further demonstrate how (not) being an insider in both cultures may seriously affect the quality of the TT, let us consider the following example quoted from Choukri's (2000: 176–177; 6th edition) الخبز الحافي

'For Bread Alone' translated by Paul Bowles (1993: 131):

–الغزال! فأين ماشي؟

- شغلك؟

“Where are you off to, handsome?”

“What do you care where I'm going?”

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Here, taking into account that the use of literal translation, i.e. 'gazelle', would fail to capture the cultural implications meant by the original writer and instead would linger within the bounds of literalness, the translator has successfully opted for a functional equivalent, i.e. 'handsome', thus reflecting the intended meaning semantically and pragmatically. To put this differently, the translator has succeeded in being an insider in the source culture, i.e. understanding the cultural experience in the SL, and being an insider in the target culture, i.e. encoding the cultural experience in the TL.

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However, the very terse response **شغلك؟** is given a somewhat formal, lengthy and comparatively polite rendition in the TT, thereby changing the register of the text. Had the translator given full consideration to the tenor and mode of the discourse, he could have suggested something like:

‘None of your business!’.

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This brief discussion shows translators' sufferings while trying to finalize their own draft. After having probed the deep symbolic levels of the original language and captured the cultural implications meant by the original writer, the translators' progress is automatically slowed down in an attempt to decide on the available local strategies that would reflect such a cultural issue in the TL "in a way that language and content will allow the [target] reader to interact in parallel fashion to the source text reader" (Hall 2008: 224).

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To finish off this section, it is worth noting that the surface level and symbolic level appear quite similar to Nida's (1964) classification of structures, viz. surface structures and deep structures. However, the cultural approach gives the translator more freedom in dealing with culture-specific expressions (cf. Almann 2013b: 37).

Thank You

