

**European Masters  
in InterCultural Communication (EEMIC)**

**Semiotics of cultures  
Culture, language and translation**

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## **Semiotics of cultures III :**

### **Translation and intercultural communication**

## **Principal topics of the course**

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## 1) Some principal types of translation

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Following the linguist Roman Jakobson, translation can be divided in three principal types:

### 1. Intralingual translation or rewording.

The verbal expression of language is replaced and interpreted by other verbal expressions of the same language.

- **“Rewording”**: word for word substitution, paraphrasing, summarizing, expanding, etc. but also commenting, “versioning”, ...
- **“Rewording”** in this sense is a “common discursive activity” occurring in any text, conversation, etc.

### 2. Interlingual translation or translation proper.

A verbal expression of one language is replaced and “interpreted” by a verbal expression of another language.

- **Translation proper** : the “shifting” of a meaning or a message from one natural language to another one.

### 3. Intersemiotic translation.

The meaning of a verbal expression is communicated by the means of non-verbal signs<sup>i</sup>.

- **Intersemiotic translation**: verbal language – gestures; verbal language – images; etc.

## 2) Translation as a social practice

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Translation as a social practice or activity may be roughly distinguished in:

- a **professional activity** (i.e. the main activity of a specific social actor called “translators”);
- a **specific activity** that takes place in one’s professional, daily-life, personal, ... activities (it is a sometimes necessary but subsidiary activity for achieving some other main activity).

Translation as a **professional practice**:

- is performed by people who are **recognized** (principally by the means of diplomas, professional reputation, or simply social relationships) to possess specific competencies or skills that enables them to proceed especially interlingual translation, i.e. translation between two different natural languages .
- professional translators are employed either in the private sector, the public sector or are working as free lance translators.
- some major sectors: literary translators, translators of non-fiction, media translators, (consecutive or simultaneous) interpreters, teachers and researchers<sup>ii</sup>.

**Professional translation as a social practice is based, framed by a specific culture (competence).**

**The framing culture of this social practice is composed by :**

- **a professional culture** of the translator (language skills, technical knowledge in translation, “general culture”, ...);
- **an embedding culture** (more general knowledge and values of the social actor/group to which belongs the translator);
- **a “personal culture”** (knowledge and values characterising the individual as a “social person”)

## 4) Translation as a form of intercultural communication

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The social practice (or activity) “translation” is also shaped by these three cultures and it contributes to the general vision of the “other”, i.e. of other cultures (other linguistic cultures, literary cultures, political cultures, etc.) as well as to the **reception** and **appropriation** of knowledge and values belonging to other cultures.

### Quotation:

“Translation is a cultural form and as a cultural form it satisfies the specific social needs of a particular social group. It keeps foregrounding the ideas the social experience and the strain of thought of that particular group.

For example, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the translations that took place from English to Kannada, brought in the concepts related to the western rationality. Undoubtedly these translations played a vital role in further shaping kannada culture.<sup>iii</sup>”

### Research topics:

- social mechanisms of **selection** of texts belonging to a specific social (institutional) context, to a specific genre to be translated and that are considered as to be “representative” or “relevant” texts;
- Social **construction** of “visions”, “images” “representations” or “stereotypes” of the “other” (of other cultural communities);
- Themes or **topoi** (“common places”) of the “other” that enters into the cultural realm of a social actor and that are used and processed in his own cultural production (cf. ideas or visions concerning the “oriental world”, the “savage”, the “mysteries of Arabic habitats”, ... that play a central role in classic but also modern literary production, ...);
- The historical changes and evolution of such cultural themes or topoi, their re-use in different social contexts as well as their function in possible changes of a cultural perception of the “other”.

Translation as a professional practice can therefore be understood as a specific type of **intercultural communication** – it is :

The (professional or more general) practice of transferring the **meaning** of a “text” (broadly speaking) from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL)

**Quotation:**

“Most people know intuitively what translation is, but it is difficult to define or to delimit it. Whilst its aim is to transfer the meaning of a text from one language to another for a similar or different kind of readership as accurately as possible, its success as a full restatement of meaning is usually only approximate.

The reproduction of the meaning of any word, particularly a mental rather than a concrete word, say *virtue* translated by *Tugend*, let alone of any sentence, say, *She is domiciled in Brighton, Sie ist in Brighton wohnhaft*, (which is less formal), is partially dependent on frequency of use; nevertheless, translation is always (more, or less) possible, and the translation of at least the message that is the core of meaning should always be entirely successful. ...

... to some extent all translations are over- or undertranslations; ...<sup>iv</sup>.”

**Central problem :**

The specificity of linguistic cultures between which meaning has to be transferred. (languages shape thought and visions – they are different but obviously not so different to make translation impossible v).

Indeed, there is a double problem:

- “**linguistic problem**” concerning the specificities of the two verbal sign systems between which a translation process takes place;
- “**cognitive problem**” concerning the specificities of knowledge and values of the two cultural realms between which the meaning or the message of a text (broadly speaking)

**Note:**

**The indeterminacy principle of meaning and radical translation** (Quine<sup>vi</sup>)

Following Quine, “*every interlingual transfer is governed by a principle of indeterminacy*”.

Problem: how to judge the quality of a translation and how to judge if a translation is “correct”

**“radical translation”**

- Quine defines radical translation as that of the language of a completely unknown ethnies (other example: archeological rests of a “dead language”);
- Comprehension of such a language: mainly based on perceptual indices;
- But how to be sure that such a translation is appropriate ?

## 5) Cultural translation

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In ethnography or anthropology<sup>vii</sup> – researchers are forced to “translate” the activities, language(s) and cultural forms of an ethnics they are studying in their own (“native”, “academic”) language and culture.

### Quotation:

“... anthropology and ethnography study the clearly defined "others" who are defined as primitive, tribal or pre-literate. Hence, their language, ways of living and ways of perceiving need to be "translated" into the language of the researcher. This is characterized as the concept of **cultural translation** by Talal Asad in one of his essays.”<sup>viii</sup>

Cultural translation, in this context: an “indigenous way of life and language” has to be translated:

- In a **common language** of the researcher (English, French, ...)
- In the **specialised language** (theory, ...) of the researcher belonging to the social actor “anthropologists/ethnographers”

“Translation” means here more particularly the interpretation and comprehension of the “other” following the point of view:

- of the **professional culture** of the ethnographer or anthropologist (i.e. his appurtenance to a scientific community)
- of his **personal culture** (i.e. his personal motivations and justifications for studying the culture of the “other”)
- of the **embedding culture** (i.e. the “visions” and representations of the “other” that are available in the society in which he lives).

**“Cultural translation” has to be seen as a more general practice (including the specialised practice of professional translation) as:**

- the **interpretation** of knowledge and values of the “other” from the point of view of the interpreter (referring to his own knowledge and values);
- the **appropriation** of the “other” (or parts of it) with respect to the culture of the “appropriator”

**The processes of interpretation and appropriation :**

- not only are mediated with respect to the cultural **specificity** of the interpreter
- but always presuppose a social **interest** of him.

**More generally speaking : problem of “**translatability**” (Wolfgang Iser<sup>ix</sup>)**

“Translatability aims at comprehension, whereas encounters between cultures or interactions between levels of culture involve either assimilation or appropriation by making inroads into one another, trying to get out of a different culture or the different intra-cultural levels what seems attractive, useful, or what has to be combated and suppressed for whatever reasons.<sup>x</sup>”

**Translatability is a key-notion for intra- and intercultural encounters and therefore for cultural and intercultural studies.**

## 6) Overt and covert translations

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In professional translation studies, J. House has introduced the central distinction between:

- **Overt translation** and
  - **Covert translation**.
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- **Overt translation**: in the translated text still remains traces or features of the text in the SL (source language)
  - **Covert translation**: the specificities of the SL are assimilated in the TL (target language) via a “cultural filter” such as that the translated text looks like as a “new” one or again as a text perfectly integrated in the cultural realm of the translating social actor.

### Quotation

“A *covert* translation operates quite ‘overtly’ in the different frame and discourse world provided in the target lingua culture without wishing to coactivate the discourse world in which the original had unfolded“ (House 1997: 114)<sup>xi</sup>.

**Features** that are concerned:

- Grammatical and lexical specificities of SL and TL
- Discursive and pragmatic features (speech acts, discursive development, ...) of SL and TL
- Rhetoric and textual genre
- Cognitive aspects (cultural themes)

## From covert translation to (“covert”) versioning

There is a continuous range of cognitive processes that lead from a covert translation to a more or free versions of a source text (but such versions are culturally always attuned and motivated by specific social interests)

**Processes of versioning:** (“free”) interpretation, collage, situation attuned summaries or syntheses, commentaries, discursive expansion, etc.

## Covert translation – versioning – cultural translation

More generally speaking:

- There is a **continuous shift** from covert translation to cultural translation (i.e. interpretation of an “other” culture, its assimilation and appropriation within the cultural realm of the translating social actor)
- Covert translation by itself can be seen as a **specific form** of cultural translation.

## 7) Global culture, language and translation

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Following Mary Snell Hornby<sup>xii</sup> and Christina Chaeffner<sup>xiii</sup> the actually emerging “global village” is a kind of **virtual seventh continent** with the **dominant lingua franca** – a simplified form of English which is neither the American English nor the British one even if its historical roots naturally have to be sought in both variants.

Mary Snell-Hornby qualifies this new continent as a **McWorld** and its lingua franca as a **McWorldEnglish**.

Implications of this new situation:

- For **cultural interpretation**,
- The **overt/covert** distinction in professional translation,
- The emergence of **new hybrid text forms** (genres).

## Quotations:

### 1) concerning the influence on cultural translation

Doris Bachmann-Medick<sup>xiv</sup>:

“... ”

*To make ourselves understood, we had both resorted [...] to the very terms that world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning [...].*

This quotation, characteristically by an Indian, the author Amitav Ghosh, points to a problem central to current discussions on such topics as translation, cultural, textual and literary transfer, and intercultural communication in today's global society. But is "the only language we had been able to discover in common" really a global language that, according to Ghosh, is based on the scientific and military supremacy of the West?<sup>3</sup> Does it really provide, together with the flood of standardized signs in media, in publicity and marketing, a general background for communication which will gradually make translation redundant?"

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### 2) concerning the influence on the functioning of covert translation:

J. House

“Covert translation is a type of translation in which the function which the original text has (had) in its discourse world is maintained. This maintenance can normally be achieved by employing a "cultural filter" with which culture-specific textual norms holding in the source language community are adapted to the norms holding in the target community. This adaptation process, however, may no longer be operative today given the dominance of the English language in many domains of contemporary life.<sup>xv</sup>”

### 3) concerning the emergence of new hybrid text forms

**Christina Schaeffner and Beverly Adab<sup>xvi</sup> :**

“A hybrid text is a text that results from a translation process. It shows features that somehow seem 'out of place'/'strange'/'unusual' for the receiving culture, i.e. the target culture.

These features, however, are not the result of a lack of translational competence or examples of 'translationese', but they are evidence of conscious and deliberate decisions by the translator.

Although the text is not yet fully established in the target culture (because it does not conform to established norms and conventions), a hybrid text is accepted in its target culture because it fulfils its intended purpose in the communicative situation (at least for a certain time).”

#### Features that are concerned:

- Verbal language (lexicon, syntax, ...);
- Non-verbal languages (visual representations, schemas and diagrammes, “accent” in oral or audio-visual texts, ...);
- Genre mixing and creation
- Textual organisation (electronic textuality, ...)
- Cultural references (“otherness in an experienced “sameness”, cultural creolisation, ...)

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<sup>i</sup> Jakobson, Roman (1959) 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', in R. A. Brower (ed.) *On Translation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 232-39.

<sup>ii</sup> cf. Paul Betcke et Paula Heino, From translation to intercultural communication <http://www.utu.fi/aurora/3-2001/44.html>

<sup>iii</sup> cf. Central Institute of Indian Languages – ANUKRITI, Mysore (India): Post graduate diploma in translation studies: Translation theories and allied disciplines. <http://www.anukriti.net/pgdts/course411/ch2a.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Newmark, Translation in a globalised world. [http://www.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/projekt\\_ejournal/jg\\_08\\_2\\_3/beitrag/Newmark1.htm](http://www.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/projekt_ejournal/jg_08_2_3/beitrag/Newmark1.htm)

<sup>v</sup> Wallace Chafe : The translation paradox. <http://www.ualberta.ca/~german/ejournal/startbei.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> Quine, V.O.W. 1953. **Word and Object**. Cambridge Mass: M.I.T. Press.

<sup>vii</sup> cf. Asad, Talal. 1986. 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British social Anthropology' in James Clifford and G.E. Marcus. (eds.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press

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- <sup>viii</sup> cf. Central Institute of Indian Languages – ANUKRITI, Mysore (India): Post graduate diploma in translation studies: Translation theories and allied disciplines. <http://www.anukriti.net/pgdts/course411/ch2a.html>
- <sup>ix</sup> W. Iser, On translatability. <http://pum12.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol4/iser.html>
- <sup>x</sup> W. Iser, *ibid.*
- <sup>xi</sup> House, J. 1997. *Translation Quality Assessment*. Tübingen: Narr
- <sup>xii</sup> Mary Snell-Hornby, Communicating in the Global Village: On Language, Translation and Cultural Identity (in : C. Schaeffner 2000)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Schaeffner, C. 2000. *Translation in the Global Village*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters
- <sup>xiv</sup> Doris Bachmann-Medick, Cultural misunderstanding in translation. [http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic96/bachmann/7\\_96.html](http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic96/bachmann/7_96.html)
- <sup>xv</sup> J. House, J. House, Maintenance and convergence in covert translation English-German. <http://www.hf.uio.no/german/sprik/english/symposium/housee.shtml>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Christina Schaeffner and Beverly Adab, The notion of hybrid text in translation: <http://www.les.aston.ac.uk/hybridhypotheses.html>