

Semiotics of culture and communication

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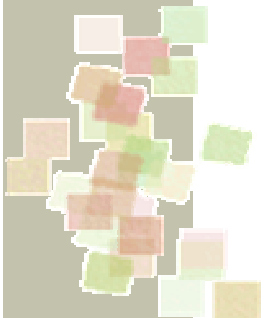
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Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO)**

Signs, culture and communication

**European Master in intercultural communication – Institut des Hautes
Etudes de Bruxelles, Belgium**

september 2004

Design graphique et multimédia : Elisabeth DE PABLO, MSH



4th course

Cultural translation



**General
content &
objectives**

- ❑ **In this course, we propose a general discussion of the social practice of « translation » and its relationship with intercultural communication. We will :**
 - 1. propose some definitions of what translation is and how it is related with other – more or less similar activities or practices such as « interpretation », « versioning », etc.;**
 - 2. show how intercultural communication as a form of exchange between two different sign systems and language can be brought up translation;**
 - 3. introduce the notion of « cultural translation » (i.e. translation of cultures);**
 - 4. outline shortly the consequences of one dominant lingua franca (i.e. a special form of English) in to-days international affairs for intercultural communication and translation.**

Course Topics

The main topics of this course are the seven following ones:

1. Intercultural communication and translation.
2. Some principal types of translation.
3. Translation as a social practice.
4. Professional translation as a form of intercultural communication.
5. Cultural translation.
6. Translation and versioning.
7. Global culture, language and translation



1st topic

- Intercultural communication and translation -

1st topic

Communication and translation

❑ Intercultural communication is any type of communication and information exchange between people **referring to two different cultural frameworks**

Example: People belonging to **two linguistic communities**
Communication is a sort of « linguistic » translation following three typical scenarios:

- ✓ use of a **lingua franca** (such as English)
- ✓ use of the **native language** of one of both communities
- ✓ use of a kind of « **reduced** » **communication means** (such as a pidgin) or a mixture of simple verbal and non-verbal signs

Example: People belonging to **two different political cultures**
Communication is a sort of cultural translation (broadly speaking), i.e.

- ✓ A sort of **interpretation** of the purposes of the other (with respect to the own cultural reference system)
- ✓ A sort of **reappropriation** of the purposes of the other (for one's own sake).

1st topic

Communication and translation

□ In this sense : **intercultural communication** can be compared to **translation** activity broadly speaking:

- ✓ as an activity to **identify** the meaning of communication signs in one language (« source language »)
- ✓ its **critical comparasion** with meaning patterns in an other language (« target language »)
- ✓ and its **restitution** as a sign belonging to the sign system of the target language.

□ But, translation (like intercultural communication):

- ✓ can be understood as an activity of the « **restitution** » of signs and their meaning in a target language
- ✓ can also be understood, much more broadly, as an activity more or less comparable with the activities « **interpretation/ appropriation** », i.e. with what is called sometimes « **versioning** ».



2d topic

- Some principal types of translation -

2d topic

Types of translation

□ 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.

2d topic

Types of translation

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

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 **[i]**.
- ✓ intersemiotic translation: verbal language – gestures; verbal language – images; etc.

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

2d topic

Types of translation

- ❑ **Translation as an intercultural communication and information exchange process** is – technically - concerned with problems identified in each of these three types of translation
 - ✓ Intralingual translation understood as « rewording » plays, naturally a central role in the translation of a text (broadly speaking) from a source language in a target language based on a **same natural language sign system** (cf. the prototypical case of science popularisation).
 - ✓ Interlingual translation understood as the « meaning shifting » from one language in an other constitutes, naturally, constitute the most obvious (but not the only !) process in **intercultural communication between two different linguistic communities**.
 - ✓ Intersemiotic translation plays a central role in translation as an intercultural process **between any sign systems (verbal or non-verbal ones)**.



3rd topic

- Translation as a social practice -

3rd topic

Translation as a social practice

- ❑ In modern times (since the 17th century), translation has become progressively a **central activity in Western (European) culture** even if, naturally, translation has been always a social practice in the history of mankind.
- ❑ The **growing importance** of translation:
 - ✓ to know and understand better the other
 - ✓ but also and especially for **pushing the European originated cultural frameworks** within those of the other and for obliging the other to accept, to adapt to the Western cultural standards (in politics, economy, law, science, ... but also in even more basic value systems such as language and religion).
- ❑ Translation has been and is certainly **one of the most important instruments** for the expansion of European (Western) cultural standards all over the world.

3rd topic

Translation as a social practice

- ❑ 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 but common 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).

3rd topic

Translation as a social practice

- ❑ 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^[i].

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

3rd topic

Translation as a social practice

- ❑ Professional translation as a social practice is based, framed by a **specific culture (semiotic 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”)



4th topic

- Professional translation as a form of intercultural communication -

4th topic

Professional translation and communication

- ❑ **The – institutionalised - social practice (or activity) “translation” :**
 - ✓ is also shaped by these **three cultures**;
 - ✓ 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.

4th topic

Professional translation and communication

□ 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.^[i]”

[i] 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>

4th topic

Professional translation and communication

- ❑ 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)
- ❑ 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” [\[i\]](#)).
- ❑ Indeed, there is a double – related - problem:
 - ✓ “**linguistic problem**” concerning the specificities of two verbal sign systems;
 - ✓ “**cognitive problem**” concerning the specificities of knowledge and values of two cultural realms)




[\[i\]](#) Wallace Chafe : The translation paradox.

<http://www.ualberta.ca/~german/ejournal/startbei.htm>

4th topic

Professional translation and communication

- ❑ Research topics in the field of “translation as an intercultural communication process”
 - ✓ **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” (cf. the 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**, there re-use in different social contexts as well as there function in possible changes of a cultural perception of the “other”.



5th topic
- Cultural translation-

5th topic

Cultural translation

- ❑ In **ethnography** or **anthropology**^[i] – 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.”^[ii]

^[i] 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

^[ii] 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>

5th topic

Cultural translation

- ❑ **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).

5th topic

Cultural translation

- “**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.

5th topic

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6th topic

- Translation and « versioning » -

6th topic

Translation and »versioning »

- ❑ In professional translation studies, J. House has introduced the central distinction between:
 - ✓ **Overt translation** and
 - ✓ **Covert translation.**
- ❑ **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)”[\[i\]](#).

[\[i\]](#) House, J. 1997. *Translation Quality Assessment*. Tübingen: Narr

6th topic

Translation and »versioning «

❑ 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**.



7th topic

- Global culture, language and translation -

6th topic

Translation and »versioning »

- ❑ Following Mary Snell Hornby^[i] and Christina Chaeffner^[ii] 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 searched for 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).

^[i] Mary Snell-Hornby, *Communicating in the Global Village: On Language, Translation and Cultural Identity* (in : C. Schaeffner 2000)

^[ii] Schaeffner, C. 2000. *Translation in the Global Village*. Clevedon: **Multilingual Matters**