

Translation as re-contextualization and a Third Space phenomenon with some implications for translator education

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In this paper I want to set out my ideas about translation as re-contextualization and a Third Space phenomenon and indicate some implications for translator education. The paper is in three parts. In the first part I will look at translation as Re-contextualization and a Third Space phenomenon. In the second part, I will briefly outline a functional theory of translation as Third Space re-contextualization. The third and final part of the paper describes a number of suggestions for translator education.

Key Words: translation, re-contextualization, third space, overt translation, covert translation, cultural filter, contrastive pragmatics

I. Translation as re - contextualization and a Third Space phenomenon

My assumption is that a translation is not, and indeed cannot be, part of the original text's lingua-cultural context, its context of situation, nor does it fully belong to the receiving lingua-cultural context. In some sense, then, a translation will always be "different", marginal, located in-between, in short, existing in Third Space. This description is of course in line with mainstream ideas in the cultural, (including literary) branch of translation studies, and is thus nothing new. New is, however, the idea of a linguistically motivated approach to looking at translation as a phenomenon of Third Space. Such an idea might serve to 'build bridges' between the cultural and the linguistic approaches to translation. I will argue that one way of building bridges and mediating between the

increasingly divergent roles of literary, cultural and linguistic approaches to translation is to consistently adopt a functional view of translation. Such an approach is fruitful because it implies a systematic consideration of the context of translation units and the embeddedness of language as a meaning-making tool in micro-situational and macro-sociocultural contexts.

What sets this account of the re-contextualized Third Space nature of translation apart from the Third Space famously suggested by Bhabha (1990; 1994), (and taken up in translation studies by Wolf, 2000 and Batchelor, 2008) is the recognition that Third Space in translation differs categorically according as the translation follows two distinct procedures: covert and overt. In the covert variety, it is the in-principle imperfect application of a so-called “cultural filter” which causes translations to hover in Third Space. In the overt procedure, it is not so much cultural, but rather linguistic expression differences which push translation into Third Space. In both cases, however, we are faced with a residual strangeness, something that confirms the age-old *traduttore-tradittore* adage (see here e.g. Clifford, 1997, p. 42).

For a theory of translation to achieve descriptive and explanatory adequacy, a conception of language as cognitively directed “text-in-function”, “text-in-communication”, “text-in-situation” (the micro-perspective) and as “text in culture” (the macro-perspective) is essential. Translation is thus an event rooted in a communicative and cultural situation. To describe and explain this event, communication must be understood as cognito-social action between two or more participants. Even in quasi-monologous written linguistic products (“texts”), where participants do not share the same spatio-temporal framework, they are clearly involved. Each communicative event is intentional, and it is (pre)determined by participants’ knowledge. The addressees of a written text are also always involved in its production. This is due both to the author’s cognitive act of anticipation and to the subsequent act of interpretation on the part of the recipients who re-enact the original communicative situation as it is triggered by the linguistic forms and their particular arrangement. Language-in-communication is always intentional, cognito-social action that always take place in situations, in which language users communicate either ‘openly’ (as

in oral hic-et-nunc-interactions) or, 'in a hidden way' (as in written interactions where participants are separated in space and time). This difference also has to do with our understanding of context. But what exactly do we mean by context?

The word 'context' is derived from the Latin verb 'texere', 'weave', and from the related Latin verb 'contexere' meaning 'to weave or join together'. Given this etymology, the word 'context' can be described as referring to the 'weaving together of words and sentences', and to the 'connection or coherence between parts of a discourse'. In a more general, figurative sense, 'context' - as used, for instance, in phrases such as 'the historical context,' 'in this context' refers to a general type of relationship or connection, such that the phrase 'in this context' can be rephrased as 'in this connection'. Here 'context' can be taken to mean 'the circumstances relevant to a phenomenon under consideration'. This latter sense of 'context' implies the notion of an environment and of conditions surrounding a specified phenomenon or object (such as a text!), and also that these conditions can be taken to determine the meaning of such phenomenon or object. Context as a phenomenon that both surrounds, and gives meaning to, phenomena and objects can further be related to concepts such as setting and background, and to Bateson's (1972) and Goffman's (1974) concept of 'frame' as well as to the 'Gestalt theorists' notions of figure and ground. All these ideas invoke 'context' as the conditions for understanding the object(s) it surrounds.

Context relates both to external (situational and cultural) factors and/or to internal, cognitive factors, all of which interact in acts of speaking and listening. In many approaches, context - and its relationship with language - is regarded as essentially dynamic rather than static. Context is here more than a set of pre-fixed variables that impact on language. Rather, context and language are seen as being in a mutually reflexive relationship, such that language shapes context as much as context shapes language (cf. e.g. the contributions in Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). Such a view of context is, I would submit, not useful for translation. Truly, translation is an act of language use, and it may well be conceptualized as a process of re-contextualization, because in translating, stretches of language are not only given a new shape in

a new language, but are also plucked from another context, and placed in a new one with different values assigned to those communicative conventions, genres, readers' expectation norms which are held for the original addressees - and also, critically, for the new recipients. What is of crucial importance in translation however is the undeniable fact that it is a 'static' in the sense of finished stretch of written text which is presented to the translator in its entirety from the start of her translation task (with the possible exception of online texts which are constantly changing). The task of translating as re-contextualization consists of enacting a discourse out of the written text, i.e., the translator creates a 'living', but essentially NOT fully dynamic, cognito-social entity replete with new - Third Space - contextual connections. The targeted context in the recipient lingua-cultural context cannot be "dynamic" or "negotiated" in the traditional sense firstly because of the power relationship implied by the connection between text and translator and secondly because of the essential futility of ever seamlessly plugging the translation into the textual world of the target lingua-culture (cf. House, 2006a). In other words, the essentially 'static' quality of context in translation arises in the very space opened up by the separation in time and space of writer and reader, and by means of the ability (and responsibility) of the translator himself or herself to define what the context is - and place it in Third Space. This is very different from the type of context conventionally invoked in oral interaction, where spoken text is a direct reflection of the discourse enacted by (physically) co-present interactants, and where a discourse sequentially develops, directly and overtly involving speaker and hearer in turns-at-talk. For translation, the immediate availability of a written text at once in its entirety (as opposed to the bit-by-bit unfolding of negotiable text and discourse) is constitutive. From this, the notion follows that context in translation is not dynamic, as it solely and simply emerges from the translator's creative imagination of a virtual context, and this context is nowhere else but in Third Space. True to the nature of written language, the realization of a discourse out of a text available in writing then involves imaginary, hidden interaction between writer and reader in the mind of translator, where the natural unity of speaker and listener in oral interaction

must be imagined in the face of the real-world separateness in space and time of writer and reader, mirroring the in-principle non-synchronous temporality of translation. The only way for the translator to overcome this separateness and create a new unity is to transcend the givenness of the text with its immutable arrangement of linguistic elements by activating its contextual connections, linking it to both its old and its new context, which a translator mentally unites making meanings anew. The outcome of this imaginative linking feat necessitated by the nature of written language with its built-in temporal and spatial constraints is the placing of the text in Third Space thus acknowledging the incommensurable differences of time and space, and context. The notion of “Third Space” invoked here is clearly in line with the Third Space notion famously outlined by Bhabha:

“The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation - the place of utterance - is crossed by the *différance* of writing. This has less to do with what anthropologists might describe as varying attitudes to symbolic systems within different cultures than with the structure of symbolic representation itself. It is this difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent.

The linguistic difference that informs any cultural performance is dramatized in the common semiotic account of the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (*énoncé*) and the subject of enunciation, which is not represented in the statement but which is the acknowledgement of its discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space...The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot in itself be conscious” (1994, p. 36).

If we substitute in the above quote “translation” for “utterance” and “enunciation,” we can see that Bhabha’s understanding of the role of Third Space in meaning making is relevant to what happens in translation in that it stresses the intervention of the Third Space of enunciation (translation) and renders the construction of meaning an ambivalent process. It is the disruptive temporality and locality inherent in all translation which accounts for its displacement into Third Space. As mentioned above, the notion of Third Space has been adapted to translation by culturally oriented translation scholars such as Wolf (2000). She has recently been criticised as having misunderstood and inappropriately simplified Bhabha by Baker (2007) and Batchelor (2008). Batchelor rightly suggests a re-location of the concept of Third Space away from a simple spatially defined “in between” to a more temporally and abstract conception where “the failure of translations to fully contain and control the originals that they bring into being” (Batchelor, 2008, p. 64) is emphasized.

For a theory of translation as Third Space re-contextualization to achieve descriptive and explanatory adequacy, it is necessary to treat context as a means of converting “inert text” (Widdowson, 2004, p. 8) into discourse in an *ex post facto* process of positioning the text in the ‘context of situation’ (Malinowski, 1935). The notion of a ‘context of situation’ developed in systemic - functional theory by Halliday and his collaborators (cf. most recently Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) - is useful for a theory of translation as re-contextualization, and indeed for the theoretical possibility of translation: Whenever communication is possible between speakers of the same language, it is also possible between speakers of different languages, and for the same fundamental reasons: through relating linguistic units to the enveloping context of situation, analyzing common situations and identifying those situations whose distinctive and unfamiliar features are peculiar, such that they can be known, interpreted and re-contextualized in the minds of translators. Given however the necessarily subjective, idiosyncratic nature of the translator’s mental actions, it is not a new ‘real’ context of situation but a Third Space which a translation is necessarily confined to inhabit. Such a view of translation as an act of re-contextualization and its locus in third space are further developed below, where a theory of translation as

re-contextualization and a third space phenomenon is described.

II. A functional theory of translation as Third Space re-contextualisation

In translating, a given text in one language is to be replaced by a functionally equivalent text in another language. “Functional equivalence” is thus a key notion in translation. It can be established (and evaluated) by referring original and translation to the “context of situation” enveloping original and translation, and by examining the interplay of different contextual factors or dimensions shaping the text (House, 1977, 1997, 2009). The dimensions are used to “open up” the text such that its textual profile, which characterizes its function, can be revealed. In order to determine the function of a text, consisting of an interpersonal and an ideational functional component which must be kept equivalent in translation, the text is analysed at the levels of *Language*, *Register* and *Genre*. The relationship between these levels can be seen in terms of semiotic planes which relate to one another in a Hjelmslevian ‘content-expression’ way, with *Genre* being the content-plane of *Register*, and *Register* being the expression plane of *Genre*. *Register* in turn is the content-plane of *Language*, and *Language* is the expression plane of *Register*. *Register* is divided in Hallidayan fashion into *Field*, *Tenor* and *Mode*. *Field* refers to the subject matter and the nature of the social action handled in the text. Along *Tenor*, the author’s temporal, geographical, and social provenance is diagnosed, as is the author’s intellectual and emotional stance (his/her ‘personal viewpoint’) vis a vis the content he/she is portraying and the communicative task he/she is engaged in. *Tenor* also captures the social role relationship between author and addressee(s), and among the fictive characters in the text as well as the “social attitude” adopted, i.e. formal, consultative and informal style levels manifest in the text. Along *Mode*, Biber’s (1988) distinctions between involved versus informational text production, explicit versus situation dependent reference, and abstract versus non-abstract presentation of information are taken into account. Establishing linguistic-textual correlates of *Register*, i.e., *Field*, *Mode* and *Tenor*, and of the *Genre* they realize - with *Genre*

being understood as reflecting the communicative purpose shared by a collectivity of texts - yields a certain textual profile characterizing its textual function, which is to be kept equivalent in translation. Genre and Register thus cover different aspects of the adaptation of language to the demands of its social use: Registers are conglomerates of linguistic features in response to situational parameters, Genres are types of linguistic objects. As linguistic objects the texts which constitute a Genre can be considered from a static or a dynamic perspective.

Equivalence of function, however, differs markedly in two empirically derived (House, 1977) types of translation, *overt* and *covert* translation. Distinguishing these two translational types is thus indispensable in any discussion of functional equivalence. The distinction of these two translation types is reminiscent of Schleiermacher's classic distinction between "einbürgernde" versus "verfremdende Übersetzung," a critical difference being however that the covert-overt distinction is tied to a well-argued theory of translation and translation criticism (1973). A translation typology is stronger in explanatory adequacy than a traditional text typology when it comes to describing and judging the different processes of translation involved in handling culture-specific phenomena in the two language communities. In other words, the claim is that in order to resolve the crucial conflict in translation between universality and culture specificity, the distinction of two basic translation types, **overt** and **covert** translation may prove insightful.

An **overt** translation is, as the name suggests, overtly a translation, not as it were a second original, hence its new addressees are quite "overtly" not directly addressed. In an overt translation, the original is tied in a specific way to the culture enveloping it; it has independent status in the source culture, and is both culture-specific and pointing beyond the source culture because the original text is also of potential general human interest. Although timeless in transmitting a general human message, texts that call for overt translation, are at the same time culture-specific because they tend to reflect a geographical or social variety and because they have independent status in the language community by means of its association to the community's cultural products. Many such texts are literary texts and can be characterized by their

fictional nature, i.e., they are situationally abstract in that they do not immediately refer to a unique historic situation. Fictional texts describe a fictive reality which is, in every reception by an individual reader, newly related to the specific historic reality in the concrete situation in which the reader finds himself. The message in a fictional text is emic, it presupposes no wider context so that everything necessary for its interpretation can in principle be found within the message itself - and this is what gives - the literary text its independent - indeed its culturally universal feature. This self-sufficiency might also explain why such texts can more easily be transferred in toto through space, time and cultures - and this despite the fact that those texts may well be heavily marked for culture-specific regional or social varieties.

The language in overt translation is for Schleiermacher (1973), interspersed with foreign elements coming from the original such that in the overt translation we see and feel “die Spuren der Mühe aufgedrückt¹⁾” (p. 45). So overt translations are texts which are in many aspects similar to their originals, but in decisive aspects - just because of this closeness- not at all similar to the original and not at all comparable. And it is here that translation theorists of the 20th century have linked up with Schleiermacher. Thus Walter Benjamin writes:

“Es ist daher [... das höchste Lob einer Übersetzung nicht, sich wie ein Original ihrer Sprache zu lesen.. Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht ...]” (1923, p. 9).

[It is therefore...not the highest praise of a translation that it reads like an original of its language. The true translation is one that is shimmering through, it does not hide the original, it does not stand in its light] (my translation).

And Ortega y Gasset (1937) goes as far as claiming that translating in any other way than overtly one does not really translate at all. We only, he says, produce an imitation or a

1) the traces of the effort superimposed on it

paraphrase of the original. Only when readers are being torn away from their linguistic habits and when they are being forced to imagine the linguistic habits of the author, can we speak of a translation proper, an “*eigentliche Übersetzung*” (a translation proper) in Koller’s (1995) words.

An overt translation is embedded in a new speech event in the target culture: it operates in a new frame, a new “discourse world,” and it is a case of “language mention” resembling a quotation or citation. In terms of the translation theory presented above, an original and its overt translation are equivalent at the levels of *Language* and *Register* as well as *Genre*. At the level of the individual textual function, however, “true” functional equivalence, is not possible. At best, an equivalence of a “removed” nature, a sort of shifted equivalence at Third Space can be achieved: its function is to enable access to the function which the original has (had) in its discourse world or frame. As this access must of necessity be realized in the target linguaculture via the translation, a switch in the discourse world becomes necessary, i.e., the translation operates in its own discourse world, and can thus reach only a sort of “topicalization” of the original’s textual function. Paradoxically, this type of functional equivalence is achieved through an equivalence at all the three analytical levels, i.e., *Language/Text*, *Register*, *Genre*, which together facilitate the co-activation of the source text’s frame and discourse world. It is through this co-activation of both discourse worlds and frames that members of the target cultural and linguistic community are put in a position to “eavesdrop,” as it were, i.e., they are enabled to appreciate the function the original text has- albeit at a - linguistic and cultural - distance at Third Space. In tackling an overt translation, the translator must therefore quite “overtly” produce a translation which allows culturally different persons gain an impression of, and “feel” for, the cultural impact that the original text has on source culture members permitting them to observe and be worked upon by the original text. In the case of overt translation, we can speak with some justification of genuine cultural transfer. Transfer is here understood as a result of a contact situation which results in deviations from the norm of the target language/culture through the influence of another language and culture. This means that in overt translation,

cultural transfer is often noticeable as a (deliberately) jarring difference (in Benjamin's sense) and deviation of the translation from target cultural norms, and it is this deviation which justifies the claim for this transfer to be one at Third Space. Given this description, an overt translation is both from a linguistic and a psycholinguistic perspective a hybrid entity.

The situation is very different in the case of **covert** translation. A covert translation is a translation which enjoys the status of an original text in the receiving culture. The translation is covert because it is not marked pragmatically as a translation at all, but may, conceivably, have been created in its own right. A covert translation is thus a translation whose original is, in terms of status not particularly tied to the target culture. An original and its covert translation are - one might say - "universal" in the sense that they differ "only" accidentally in their respective languages. While it is thus clear that certain texts designed for "ready consumption," ephemeral and transitory texts, such as e.g. instructions, commercial circulars, advertisements and other "pragmatic texts" such as journalistic and scientific texts, are not culture-bound, it is the covert type of translation such texts (normally) require which presents much more subtle and intricate cultural translation problems than overt translation. In order to meet the needs of the new addressees in their cultural setting, the translator must take different cultural presuppositions in the two cultures into account, re-creates an equivalent speech event and reproduce in the translation the function the original has in its linguistic-cultural framework, i.e., "real" functional equivalence is aimed at, and often achieved in covert translation. A covert translation operates quite "overtly" in the different frame and discourse world set up by the target culture without, however, wishing to co-activate the discourse world in which the original had unfolded. Covert translation is thus at the same time psycho-linguistically less complex than overt translation and more deceptive. It often results in a very real cultural distance from the original text, since the original is transmuted in varying degrees, and it is the translator's task to "cheat", as it were, and to remain hidden behind his feat of deception regarding the origin of the text produced. Since true functional equivalence is aimed at, changes at

the levels of Language/Text and Register may, if necessary, be freely undertaken, and the result may be a very different text, which is the reason for the fact that covert translations are often received as though they were original texts. But they are not, they are texts in Third Space.

In aiming at “originality” in a covert translation, the translator will employ a so-called “cultural filter.” With the use of this filter, the translator can make systematic allowances for culture specificity accommodating for differences in socio-cultural norms and differences in conventions of text production and communicative preferences. This “cultural filter” is thus the means with which the translator tries to **compensate** for culture specificity. We can differentiate four levels of culture (House, 2004): first, a general human level (where human beings both strive for community with others and keeping their privacy (come together versus *noli me tangere*); second, a level of the group and society; third various social, ethnic or religious subgroups according to geographical region, social class, age, sex, professional activity etc.; fourth, the personal, individual level, i.e. the level of cultural consciousness. Of these levels, it is only the first one which is universal, all the others are culture-specific. In translating covertly, the translator will have to take account of them and apply a cultural filter accordingly.

The concept of a cultural filter is the core of covert translation. In any translating task translators are faced with subtle differences in cultural preferences, mentalities and values that need to be known for a covert translation and for the application of a cultural filter. Such knowledge should be based on empirical research into language pair-specific cultural differences, the assumption being that research into culturally determined communicative preferences in two discourse communities can give more substance to the concept of a cultural filter than mere intuition and tacit native-speaker knowledge and understanding can provide. One example of such research involving English and German discourse are my own studies of German and English difference and commonalities in discourse conventions (for a summary of this research, cf. e.g. House, 2000, 2006b, 2009, 2010). Research into discourse norms holding in different lingua-cultural communities add substance to the notion of

a cultural filter and they also implicitly suggest that linguistic differences in the realization of discourse phenomena may be taken to reflect deeper differences in cultural preference patterns and expectation norms at a conceptual-cognitive and emotive (“mentality”) level. Still, we cannot claim that with the application of a cultural filter a translation ever achieves full functional equivalence, rather it will remain in Third Space - a foreign body in the context and in its old one from which it was removed.

To sum up, in having to operate on written texts the translator must singly and creatively (mentally) construct context as a Third Space phenomenon and enacts discourse *ex post facto*. Re-contextualization amounts to taking a text out of its original situational-cultural context and placing it within a new set of relationships in Third Space in the receiving culture. The distinction between overt and covert translational procedures reflects divergent ways of solving the translator’s re-contextualization task: in overt translation, the original’s context is reactivated alongside the new target context, such that two different discourse worlds and frames are juxtaposed in the medium of the target language with the resulting Third Space resembling a sort of schizophrenic duality of a new order. In covert translation, the translator directs his sole attention on the envisaged new target context, employing a cultural filter to cater to the imagined new audience’s context-derived communicative norms. Covert translation is more immediately affected by contextual differences. However, it is never possible to overcome these differences completely. Here too, then, the Third Space will have to suffice.

III. Some implications for translator education

Given the above ideas about the nature of translation and the limitations of reaching perfect equivalence, the following general guidelines and principles for the training and education of translators suggest themselves:

1. Translators’ theoretical competence should be strengthened such that translators become sophisticated linguistic-cultural experts able to reflect on, and be

self-critical of, their own actions.

2. The importance of functional approaches to describing, analyzing language and to producing and evaluating translations should be emphasized.
3. Awareness of the nature of re-contextualization and of Third Space as well as the fundamental distinction between overt translation and covert translation should be increased.
4. Translators should be empowered to argue with supervisors and clients about decisions as to whether an overt or a covert translation is adequate in any given instance.
5. Communicative styles and preferences in the two linguacultures that meet in translation need to be researched by translation students such that the expectation norms of the target audiences can be understood in covert translation and be made available in the employment of a cultural filter.
6. An evidence-based approach is to be preferred in translator education. This involves the systematic use of empirical (preferably corpus-based and contrastive pragmatic) data to aid practitioners in their work and to clarify common sense assumptions.
7. The education of translators should be professionalized. The translators' profession might then be compared with the professions of physicians, lawyers, architects etc.
8. Professionalism in translation consists of knowing explicitly what one is doing when translating at any one particular moment. It means to be able to verbalize the rationale for one's translational choices and to explain the theoretical assumptions behind them.

9. As a member of the translators' profession translators should be highly qualified specialists who are in a position to discuss and explain their actions with fellow translators, supervisors and clients in an effective manner just like "a physician explains to a patient why she should take a prescribed pill" (Viaggio, 1994. pp. 104-105).
10. In order to raise the translator's profession from the status of "mere" practitioner to that of highly qualified expert on a par with the profession of e.g. physicians or lawyers, it is necessary for translators to have an adequate command of theoretical knowledge of the field which can at any moment be "probed, shared and discussed" (Bell, 1991, p. 17).
11. In translator education we need a healthy combination of theory, description and practice so as to enable translators to handle problem-predicting, decision-making and problem-solving processes involved in translation with optimal self-monitoring capacity, self-awareness and responsibility.
12. As Ulrych (2002) has suggested, translators themselves - as true professionals - should be responsible for making translation theories relevant to translation practice, and they should develop a critical awareness of the usefulness of different theories of translation as a first step towards acquiring new skills emerging from their own critical evaluation of these theories.

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