

TRANSLATION IN THE GLOBAL CULTURAL ECONOMY: ASYMMETRIES, DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY

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Abstract:

While globalization per se (and the related topic of global cultural homogeneity) does not in and of itself exhaust the range of relevant questions about translation in the contemporary world, it is here argued that a focus on globalization is a promising route to the reflection on issues of asymmetries, difference and identity in translation. One of such issues would be the role of translation in responding to the march of the overall globalization process toward the making of the entire world into a single space. Within this context, this paper (i) interrogates Appadurai's (1990) framework for the cultural study of globalization so as to problematize the metaphor of the "fractals" for global cultural interactions by exploring what this metaphor leaves in the dark; (ii) draws on Asad's (1986) comments on "The Inequality of Languages and on Jacquemond's (1992) view of the inequality in the global translation flux; and, finally, (iii) makes the connection of these views with translation as the central issue in all communication and sociopolitical interaction between the 'first' and the 'third' worlds, suggesting that questions dealing with the relative power and prestige of cultures – with matters of dominance, submission and resistance – might profitably move center stage in translating, in translation teaching and in the analysis of translations. The questions informing the reflections are: To what extent does globalization exhibit the effects of domination by the power centers of global culture? To what extent can globalization be said to impact upon translation as regards "the asymmetrical power relationship between the various local vernaculars and the one master-language of our post-colonial world, English"?

Keywords: Globalization and translation; power differentials; asymmetrical relationships.

The new impetus which has come to Translation Studies is the focus on culture as being linked to notions of power, asymmetries, difference and identity.

Schäffner, C. 2000, p. 9

1. Introduction

The Fifth International Conference on Translation to be held in October 2001, at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona-*Interculturality and Translation: Less-Translated Languages*-is announced in the following terms:

Globalisation has brought about a great increase in contact between cultures, which has had its impact on translation; in the last years of the second millennium, translation has experienced its greatest period of expansion ever. In spite of this overall growth, long-standing relationships of power have perpetuated the hegemony of some languages over others, and so access to the global translation market for different languages and cultures is unequal, as shown in the UNESCO's World Culture Report. According to 1994 statistics, 28,646 English works were translated into other languages, while less than 300 works were translated from languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Portuguese (<http://www.fti.uab.es/ti2001>).

Two aspects called my attention in this announcement: (i) the direct, as opposed to indirect, attention to globalisation in the context of Translation Studies and (ii) the inclusion of Portuguese among the so called less-translated languages. To my mind, this direct attention to makes a significant difference to matters of translation as regards communication and sociopolitical interaction between the 'first' and the 'third' worlds. As to the second aspect, the inclusion of Portuguese among the less-translated languages is suggestive of its position in the global cultural economy.

While globalization per se (and the related topic of global cultural homogeneity) does not in and of itself exhaust the range of relevant questions which must be asked about translation in the contemporary world, it is here argued that a focus on globalization is a promising route to the reflection on issues of asymmetries, difference and identity in translation. One of such issues would be the role of translation in responding to the march of the overall globalization process toward the making of the entire world into a single space. Within this context, this paper (i) interrogates Appadurai's (1990) framework for the cultural study of globalization so as to problematize the metaphor of the "fractals" for global cultural interactions by exploring what this metaphor leaves in the dark; (ii) draws on Asad's (1986) comments on "The Inequality of Languages and on Jacquemond's (1992) view of the inequality in the global translation flux; and, finally, (iii) makes the connection of these views with translation as the central issue in all communication and sociopolitical interaction between the 'first' and the 'third' worlds, suggesting that questions dealing with the relative power and prestige of cultures – with matters of dominance, submission and resistance – might profitably move center stage in translating, in translation teaching and in the analysis of translations.

Hence my basic questions: To what extent does globalisation exhibit the effects of domination by the power centers of global culture? To what extent can globalisation be said to impact upon translation as regards "the asymmetrical power relationship between the various local vernaculars and the one master-language of our post-colonial world, English"? (Bassnett & Trivedi 1999, p. 13).

2. Interrogating Appadurai's framework for the cultural study of the global phenomenon

Central to the task of grasping the nature of globalisation is the interrogation of Appadurai's (1990) framework for the cultural study of the global phenomenon. I would like to begin my interrogation of

his text by an examination of the title, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy'. Disjuncture-from Latin '*disjunctus*'-together with the Latin verb '*disjungere*', bears the meaning of 'releasing from the oppression'. Translating the title intralinguistically, then, we have something like 'Releasing from oppression and difference in the Global Cultural Economy', which is suggestive of the possibility of symmetrical relations between parties on a global scale.

Grounded in the anthropological literature, Appadurai argues that "the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of *sameness* and *difference* to cannibalize one another" (17). By going beyond what he considers the "incongruent" traditional oppositions between culture and power, or between the global and the local, he claims to offer a framework capable of avoiding the dangers of obliterating difference in global cultural interactions. The nouns *flow* and *fluidity*, the adjectives *shifting* and *moving* are the lexical items he uses to describe social processes, whose form, he claims, is marked as non-fixed.

What I find particularly interesting is the term *mutual*, with which Appadurai describes the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another. Mutuality implies reciprocity, that is, a relation of giving and taking on equal terms. Such a mutuality is connected by Appadurai to his suggestion that "the theory of global cultural interactions will have to move into something like a human version of the theory that some scientists are calling 'chaos' theory" (20).

Appadurai's chaos theoretic approach sees global culture in terms of a disjunctive series of flows of *persons*, *technologies*, *finance*, *information and ideology* or to use his terms, a disjunctive series of '*scapes*' (the common suffix of the five terms coined by him to refer to such flows, namely, *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes*, *mediascapes* and *ideoscapes*).

One of the macro-metaphors used to signify what Appadurai (328) calls "the central problem of today's global interaction-the tension between *cultural homogenization* and *cultural*

heterogenization”—that is, the seemingly incongruent ideas of universalism and particularism respectively—is the ‘fractals’ metaphor. As he sees it, the configuration of cultural forms in today’s world is fractal, allowing for diverse modes of particular/localized shapes and for mutual overlappings. A fractal (a term originally coined by the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot) is a geometric figure with small micro-structures whose shape is marked by fluidity; its basic characteristic is then its non-stability. An interesting aspect about a fractal is self-similarity at different scales. In other words, a fractal shape will look almost the same no matter what size it is viewed at: a good example of this is clouds, which tend to look very similar no matter what their size is, which means that any arbitrarily selected small region of a fractal looks like the entire fractal. We have then a picture of fluidity, non-stability, self-similarity and, consequently, lack of a fixed center.

While I am not denying the acuteness of Appadurai’s observations and the originality of his model of disjunctive flows I would argue that the terms in which he proposes to describe the global cultural economy seem to quickly occlude the signs of crucial political matters which inhabit the global system and to quickly rely on the possibility of an egalitarian relationship between different cultural configurations. In its insistence on going beyond what Appadurai calls incongruent ideas of universalism and particularism and the equally incongruent ideas of power differentials in the global cultural economy, this view of the world as an interactive system – in which social forces are in a permanent state of tension and negotiation – clearly involves the rejection of the idea of culture as being linked to notions of power and asymmetries.

Hence, the basic questions emerging from my reading of this text: Is it possible to move beyond the significance of the particular-universal connection as ‘necessarily incongruent’? Is it possible to move beyond issues of power and asymmetries that structure the global interactive system?

Curiously, echoes of my interrogation can be found in Appadurai’s text itself. In the closing section, ‘Shape and Process

in Global Cultural Formations', one question is asked in a somewhat apologetic way as "one other old-fashioned question out of the Marxist paradigm: is there *some pre-given order to the relative determining force of these global flows?* (italics mine)" (337). From within his optimistic model, Appadurai seems to allow for some of these flows to be "prior to and formative of other flows" (ibid.). Particularly in the case of *technoscape* and *finanscape*, he acknowledges the fact that "intense specialization in a special technological sector (...) and specific flows of capital may well profoundly determine the shape that ethnoscaples, ideoscaples and mediascaples may take" (338). Thus the focus on disjunctures and the suggestion of the configuration of cultural forms in today's world as fractal to stress the flows along which cultural material may be seen to be moving do not seem to obliterate the fact that asymmetries exist and come to bear upon trans-national relationships.

3. Expanding the conversation: Asad's and Jacquemond's reflections on cultural inequalities in translation

In an attempt to reflect on the questions put above, I would like to bring some other voices into my discourse. Back in 1986, Asad, in the context of British cultural anthropology and exploring the scene of the European anthropologist before an indigenous culture, problematised the straightforwardness in which cultural translation was done. He was an important voice to draw critical attention to the centrality of cultural inequalities in translation, by constructing a problem in anthropological studies, which can be formulated in the following terms: (i) The anthropological enterprise of cultural translation may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies; (ii) Anthropologists need to explore these processes in order to determine how far they go in defining the possibilities and the limits of effective translation.

In his article, Asad moves from a historical overview of the literature on 'cultural translation' into a section on the inequality of languages. He probes into the matter of power in the discursive process of translation, speaking of 'strong languages' of industrialized countries and of "weak languages" of developing countries. In his view, "the languages of the Third world societies... are "weaker" in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English" ...) (157). Asad's observations are made in the context of cultural translation, in which the translator / ethnographer cannot count on a 'source text' from which to work: in fact, he has to render the other's oral discourse into a translated text in his own strong language, submitting the other's world structures and view to his own. The consequences of this situation of asymmetrical power relations for the issue of representation of cultures are obvious.

This way of looking at the issue of the inequality of languages is compatible with Jacquemond's view on inequality in the global translation flux. In his 1992 article ("Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation"), Jacquemond is concerned with the postcolonial relations between Egypt and France. But the schema he abstracts out of those relations for the study of translation is worth considering. By examining the politics of French to Arabic and Arabic to French translation, he delineates a translation theory in the context of cultural hegemony-dependency (139): "A political economy of translation is consequently bound to be set within the general framework of the political economy of intercultural exchange." In this sense, translation tendencies follow the global trends of international trade. Using his words, "North-South translation is unequal: cultural hegemony confirms, to a great extent, economic hegemony" (139).

Translation is then the central issue in all communication and sociopolitical interaction between the 'first' and the 'third' worlds. Here I quote Venuti (1998): "The status of translation in the global economy ... calls attention to the unequal cultural exchange that involves the exploitation of foreign print and electronic media and the exclusion and

stereotyping of foreign culture at home” (p.159) and (...) “establish[es] a hierarchical relationship between the major and minor languages, between the hegemonic and subordinate cultures” (165).

I would like to turn now to a publication released in 2000, *Translation in The Global Village*, edited by Christina Schäffner, which looks at the issue from a different (but equally important) perspective, in terms of the new demands globalisation places on the discipline of translation and on the translator. In this context, some questions regarding translating and translator education are asked: How do we prepare future professional translators for the continuing changing requirements of the world? Should training at institutions focus on developing an awareness of what professional decision-making in translation involves? What exactly is the task of a university in this context? What about an awareness of the decisions as to a general translation policy in a country (e.g. who decides how many and which texts are translated, from and into which languages?) Although these issues are not directly related to the points I am trying to make in this paper, they are also part of the picture and constitute sufficient evidence to suggest that the link between globalisation and translation is a serious concern and should deserve attention.

4. Final reflections: the role of translation in responding to the movement of the overall globalisation process

For the role of translation in responding to the movement of the overall globalisation process toward the making of the entire world into a single space, I draw on Michaela Wolf’s words, in her 1995 article “Translation as a process of power”, in which she explores aspects of cultural anthropology in translation:

As far as the specific question of asymmetrical power relations in translating between cultures is concerned, a new concept of translation is necessary which needs to create a *new awareness of the relationship between “strong” and “weak” languages* (...). In or-

der to detect these asymmetries, analyses of the economic and political processes in the source and target society could be increasingly employed for translation between cultures, which would subsequently reveal the constraints in the production and the reproduction of texts (Wolf 1995, p. 131, italics mine).

I have a lot of sympathy with the view advanced by Wolf with respect to the creation of awareness and to the need for analysis of the economic and political processes in the source and target societies. In this sense, and to conclude, I would like to say that in bringing these considerations into my discussion of power differentials in translation and in taking the notion of globality seriously, I have tried to make the point that questions dealing with the relative power and prestige of cultures in the context of globalisation—with matters of dominance, submission, and resistance—might profitably move center stage and receive *direct*—as opposed to *indirect*—attention in translating, in translation teaching, and in the analysis of translations. In other words, I would insist on the need for training in sensitivity to (i) the historical and ongoing effects of imperial power and to (ii) the political weight of and the hegemonic position of English, the language which comes to embody transnational culture.

Note

1. A preliminary version of this text was delivered at The Eighth National Translation Forum / The Second Brazilian International Translation Forum, *Translating the New Millennium: Corpora, Cognition and Culture*, held in Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil, 23-27 July 2001.

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