

THE IDENTITY OF FICTIONAL TELEVISION CHARACTERS AS A TRANSLATION COMPETENCE

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Much of translation studies literature has focused on the translation of cultural references since *The Cultural Turn* that took place during the 80' and so well explained by Snell- Hornby (2006). This article is also concerned with the translation of cultural references, specifically the cultural references occurring in television drama and comedy. Nevertheless, the perspective taken here is that of the information inferred by the viewers in relation to the identity of the characters and the competences to be taught in translation classes to meet this objective, since my premise is that the cultural references perform, among others, an expressive function.¹ In other words, the topics a person speaks about i.e., his or her referents, generate social representations in one's interlocutors which enable them to construct a view of his or her identity.

This article will consider the type of information deriving from the cultural references uttered by the characters in fictional television programmes and how this can influence the process of translating character identity. The examples used will be taken from the Irish television series *Bachelors Walk*, successfully broadcast by RTE in 2001-2002. This series has not, as far as I know, been translated to any other language; however, this article is more concerned with the role of references in the construction of the identity of fictional characters than specific instances of how they were or would be translated. Indeed, this is a type of class exercise that has proved very successful because it focuses on grasping information from the original text rather than on thinking over the possible translation.

Bachelors Walk is an Irish-produced comedy series based around the lives of three male characters who share a house on Bachelors Walk: Raymond, Barry and Michael. Raymond, the most adult and mature of the three, is a journalist down on his professional luck and obsessed with his ex-fiancée, Kate, who at the start of the first episode comes back to Dublin after a year spent working in New York. Michael is a

¹ Santamaria (2010)

solicitor who spends his time avoiding work and putting off any commitment to his girlfriend, Jane, who discovers she is pregnant at the same time as Michael loses his job and breaks off their relationship. The third member of the male trio is Barry, described by Shane McGinley who could be described as a nice lazy guy always trying to figure out how to get rich as soon as possible. In the second episode Barry begins a relationship with Jenny, a rather Lolita-like student and Alison, a newcomer, moves into the house on Bachelors Walk. Alison is an open-minded, frank girl who works in an art gallery and is engaged to a doctor from Donegal, in the northwest of Ireland.

The premises underlying this article are twofold:

1. texts occur in social contexts and language is a manifestation of it, i.e., it identifies social relations. Cultural references, as elements of language, are also part of this identification process.
2. since translation is a cultural operation, it has a bearing on the perception of identities.

Cultural references in Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis has highlighted the relationship between language and ideology, and how ideology determines the nature of the linguistic interactions among speakers. Sociolinguists had already studied, for example, discourse occurring in a doctor's surgery, the courtroom and classroom, but Critical Discourse Analysis² aims to highlight the hegemonic relations which underlie the discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

Fairclough proposes several specific forms of discourse analysis to uncover the underlying ideology (Fairclough, 1995: chapter 7). While this method³ proposes textual

² I am claiming language use to be imbricated in social relations and processes which systematically determine variations in its properties, including the linguistic forms which appear in texts. (Fairclough, 1995:73)

³ Lee (1992:107) proposes analysis of the point of view of the vocabulary used and the alternation of theme and rheme. Kress (1985:34) also proposes an analysis of vocabulary, in addition to content structuring. For Fowler (1985:70-73), the list of items to be included is as follows: lexical processes, transitivity, syntax, omissions, sequences, syntactical complexity, la modality, speech acts, implications, turn-taking, ways of addressing others and phonetic divergences from standard speech. Especially rich is the model proposed by van Dijk (1996).

analysis on the basis of intertextual relations and linguistic elements at sentence level (grammar, phonology, vocabulary and semantics) and supra-sentence level (cohesion), it does not consider cultural references although a clear correlation can be established.

In the second episode of "Bachelors Walk" we find an example of the stereotypical discourse that highlights the existence of ideologically marked patterns. One of the characters, Barry, has an interview in the employment office and the setting (the seating arrangements of both interlocutors, the notebook held by the office worker, the furniture, etc.) clearly indicates the hegemony of the female interviewer over Barry. We learn about Barry's unconventional personality through his responses (he disagrees, for instance, with the interviewer on the wisdom of the government's employment policy). Indeed, Barry's unconventional responses are the source of the comedy, being so out of keeping with what would be expected in such a situation. Another example is found in the third episode with the appearance of Davor, a computer class-mate of Barry. Davor is an immigrant, and has difficulty responding to the stereotypical greeting "pleased to meet you" with the standard cliché "pleased to meet you too". On the other hand however, apart from pronunciation, his English is very good and he does not make grammar or vocabulary mistakes.

Although cultural references have not been studied from the point of view of Critical Discourse Analysis, a number of works do present cultural objects as "commodities" associated to a certain ideology. Stallybrass (1999), for instance, demonstrates that what we wear is more than just an item of clothing, and that there is a close link between certain garments and the social groups who tend to wear them in given societies. Among other examples, Stallybrass cites that of the Incas who, on conquering new territories, gave clothing to the conquered which then became a symbol of the obligations of the individual with respect to the state. Bourdieu (1984) also finds an ideological element in eating preferences: the working classes of western societies do not see fish as "proper" food for men, not being sufficiently filling. Instead they choose meat and pork products, whereas the women prefer vegetables and salads.

There are certain social constructs which also contain an ideological component, although they cannot be considered as commodities in the strict sense of the term. Herb (1992) considers that "monuments, settlements, and other places are concentrated nodes and circuits of memory". Therefore, it was not easy for Germany to make Berlin its capital city once again, since reminiscences of Prussian militarism still lingered in its air

along with the events occurring during the Nazi era. Herb (1992) postulates that “the significance of these places (nationalistic monuments) is defined by their physical characteristics (locale), the meaning that is ascribed to them in the national narrative (sense of place), and their position in the larger territorial setting of the nation (location).

The network of values linked to place names and their surroundings can be difficult to translate, an example being the very title of the television series our examples are drawn from. "Bachelors Walk" is the name of the street in Dublin where the characters in the series live. We have then, in the name of the series, a referent which not only situates it geographically but also associates it with a number of national values, stored and maintained in collective memory, which cannot be directly transferred to another culture without the addition of a subtitle. In the translation process, the elements associated with the referents which form part of the collective memory of the society generating the text cannot be transferred unless additional information is provided to the viewers. Every cultural reference triggers certain values in its own setting, and this might not be true when directly translated into another culture; however, in the case of toponyms, it is even more difficult to indicate the information that needs to be included for successful transfer.

In previous work (Santamaria, 2000 and Santamaria, 2010), I have shown that cultural referents can be categorised ideologically in that they revealed the speaker's social position. The table below presents the ideological categories for cultural referents and their associated social context.

| IDEOLOGICAL CATEGORY | COMMODITIES | EXAMPLES |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Ecology | Referents associated with personal experience of the environment | toponyms, the weather |
| History | Referents associated with repositories of social meaning | monuments, people, events |
| Social Structure | Referents associated with environments related to the production of meaning | work and social organisation, politics |
| Cultural Institutions | Referents associated with environments related to the propagation of meaning | media, religion, education and arts |

| | | |
|------------------|--|---|
| Social Universe | referents associated with manifestations of social meaning | social conditions, communication systems and cultural geography |
| Material Culture | Products associated with the cultural manifestations of given groups | food, clothes, technology, home and leisure |

Barry appears in the first episode of the series. The viewers can derive information on the type of person he is from many different features (physical appearance, variety of English employed), and also from the cultural references he makes in a number of categories:

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| line of work | Social Structure | Work |
| job center | Social Structure | Work |
| Supervisor | Social Structure | Work |
| personal manager | Social Structure | Work |
| Independent theatre | Cultural Institutions | Art |
| self-management | Social Structure | Work |
| street theatre | Cultural Institutions | Art |
| Job | Social Structure | Work |
| Telly | Cultural Institutions | Media |
| School | Cultural Institutions | Education |
| EU regulation | Social Structure | Work |
| Right | Social Structure | Work |
| Companies | Social Structure | Work |
| Employer | Social Structure | Work |

In the first episode, Barry is trying to become the manager of a number of street artists, and when he visits the job centre because his unemployment money has come to an end, he discovers that he must take a training course. The references point in the direction of Cultural Institutions and Social Structure, however, further interpretation is needed in order to reach the identity which the series directors wish to confer on him. While Barry is linked to the institutions that control the production of meaning in modern society, his identity cannot however be defined as an institutional actor. In the fourth episode, he continues trying to find a job suitable to his outlook and tries to set up a computer company with Davor, a classmate. Once again, the referents correspond to the same

area, but this time the effect is comical because Barry's attitude is diametrically opposed to the image these social institutions try to transmit.

This is the basis which I propose for study and teaching of the translation of cultural references, since like other linguistic elements, they too have an ideological value.

Cultural references and the process of creating identities

To consider the identities created by cultural references we must first have a definition of identity. Van Dijk (1998) defines identity as follows:

identity is both a personal and social construct, that is, a mental representation located in personal (episodic) memory. (Van Dijk, 1998:118)

According to this definition, the individual's identity is formed from experiences and from the meanings they take on. On this basis, we can also infer that by means of a cognitive process, the individual recognises prevalent behaviour patterns and adjusts his behaviour to them.

Identity is, then, both social and also personal, as will be seen later:

Social identity will be understood as that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership to describe limited aspects of the concept of self which are relevant to certain limited aspects of social behavior. (Tajfel, 1981:255)

Therefore, the intrinsic need to belong to a group⁴ that humans feel, leads us to construct an idea of our identity, and by exclusion, of the identity of others. Although we all form part of more than one community,⁵ at certain times we choose one in preference to others, that is, our identification with it is on a higher level on a scale of preference.⁶

TV characters provide a good example of these multiple identities. We must bear in mind, as Hall (1996) points out, identities are revealed through discourse patterns and,

⁴ Also Berger and Luckmann (1995:41 &ff.).

⁵ Berger and Luckmann (1995).

⁶ Van Dijk (1998:120). This author stresses his preference for the term "identification" rather than "identity", since it is less static and incorporates the possibility of modification.

on this basis, it becomes clear that the identification process is never complete but in constant regeneration.

Below, I provide an example of how viewers may revise earlier interpretations regarding character identity. One of the characters appearing in the second episode is Jenny, a seventeen year old student who embarks on a relationship with Barry. When we first see her she is wearing her school uniform in the video club where Barry spends a lot of time talking about films. She is looking for a film she says she needs for her schoolwork. Barry invites her to come to Michael's birthday party at the house on Bachelors Walk, where she takes on an entirely different identity, more along the lines of a Lolita-like sexual object. Jenny is presented to us with a number of different identities, and depending on the situation, one may serve to disguise the other. We can see then that identity creation is an open-ended, ongoing process.

The need to belong to a given group also means that we see members of other groups as different from us. Every time we appear to others, they must seek information about us. Among the elements enabling others to obtain this information, Goffman (1990:34) uses the term "personal front" to refer to "items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes". Among these, he includes insignia and clothing, both of which are also cultural references.

Returning to the example above, at the video club Jenny asks for the 1942 Orson Wells film "The Magnificent Ambersons". The assistant tells her that the card she has given in does not have sufficient credit to rent the film. Jenny apologises saying that the card belongs to her brother and the assistant tells her that he still has not returned a film called "Shaving Ryan's Privates", a title which immediately tells us that the film is pornographic.⁷ So Jenny first appears as a schoolgirl intent on carrying out her schoolwork, but later, the viewer is provided with evidence for a reassessment of this first identification.

Woodward (1997:2) described the relation established between these cultural elements as follows:

⁷ A network of intertextuality is created between this imaginary porn film and the film made by Craig Moss (1998) entitled "Saving Ryan's Privates", which was itself a play on words on Stephen Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" (1998).

Identities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture (...) in order to gain fully understanding of a cultural text or artifact, it is necessary to analyse the processes of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation.

Therefore, objects, which for the purposes of translation we term cultural references, are a means of identification.

The process of identifying is a cognitive one. Fairclough (1995:33) distinguishes four categories of knowledge needed by participants in the discourse: knowledge of the linguistic codes, knowledge of the principles and norms of language use, knowledge of the situation and knowledge of the world. Therefore, when a transfer process such as translation takes place, a mismatch may occur between the knowledge shared by receptors of the original text and that shared by receptors of the translation, a translation competence that has been acquired.

With regard to knowledge of linguistic codes, a linguistic expression has, as pointed out above, an ideological component which may function differently when transferred to another culture. Linguistic codes, in general, adhere to the norms which regulate them and viewers will immediately seek the reason behind any departure from these norms.⁸

The principles and norms of language use are different for each language and even for different varieties of the same language. Since in most cases of audiovisual translation it is only the strictly verbal codes that are transferred, certain social behaviour patterns may be difficult for the target audience to understand.

In the second episode of the series, as we have already explained, Barry starts the computer course as part of his employment training and meets Davor, an immigrant. Davor's identity is constructed on the basis of his linguistic errors and difficulties, and also his infringements of conversation norms. For example, he tells Barry that the Irish are unfriendly and that he finds it difficult to get to know them; thus infringing the norm of not criticising others in their presence. Then, when Barry invites him to the party although it is not due to start for some hours, Davor does not leave his side. At the party itself, he constantly asks those around him to tell him the names of the girls until they

⁸ We have already seen that Davor, the immigrant Barry meets at the computer course commits certain infringements of the language code; however, these infringements are never so marked as to pose an obstacle to viewers understanding his discourse.

finally get tired of his conversation and escape. All these errors present Davor as someone who is unaware of the social norms for behaviour in given situations.

In "Bachelors Walk" we also find examples of how speakers need certain knowledge of the world in order to understand the meaning of a given situation. Since discourse always takes place in a given cultural context, translation may have to overcome the difficulties caused by the fact that the target audience may have a different knowledge of the world than that assumed by the original text. In the second episode, when Raymond invites Jane to the party, she asks whether she should bring a present; Raymond says there is no need to bring anything yet Jane comes to the party with a bottle. Jane's behaviour could seem strange to the viewers of the translated text if they do not understand that bringing a bottle to parties is a social convention so that there will be enough to go round. Indeed, it soon becomes clear that everyone has brought a bottle.

The type of knowledge required (knowledge of linguistic codes, principles and norms of language use, knowledge of the situation and the world) for correct interpretation of a given text explains why translation becomes more difficult the more distant the languages involved, but also why we might find certain customs portrayed in television programmes made in distant cultures so surprising even when the language involved is ours.

It is precisely because the knowledge of the situation and of the world embodied in the cultural referent have such a high cultural content, that translation can be so difficult. This is so because, in order to permit correct identification of the reference, in other words, to maintain the social representation generated by the reference in receptors of the original text, the audience of the translation must be able to relate it with their cultural setting and then assign it a specific ideological value and other associated components.⁹

When it is the images alone that convey the meaning, that is, when no linguistic transfer is needed, identifying the characters may prove even more difficult for the viewer of the translated text. In the first episode of "Bachelors Walk", Raymond gets up early to find out whether his ex-fiancée's plane has arrived on time. He checks by means of the teletext. There is no spoken dialogue or message, so the viewers have to infer that this is

⁹ Santamaria (20010).

the explanation for his behaviour in these voiceless images. In the fourth episode, before setting out from Dublin to Donegal, Alison goes to the supermarket and buys ice-cream, fruit and chocolate for the trip. These items, (Material Culture category), have certain associated values on the basis of which the viewers will construct an identity for Alison.

Another consideration in the understanding of referents and then relating them to a given identity is the all-important role of memory. Not only is memory necessary in order to understand the past, but also to establish an appropriate link with who we are in the present (Weissberg, 1999:10). Collective memory enables individuals to establish points in common with their group and differences between themselves and other groups (Halbwachs, 1968). This facilitates the creation of identities.

For example, in the first episode there is a reference to New York, where Kate has spent a year working. Emigration is, or at least was, a major feature of Irish life; until quite recently a large part of the population was forced to emigrate due to a lack of employment opportunities. Therefore, the fact that Alison has spent a year abroad has a specific meaning for the original audience which might not be the same for the audience of the translated text. The emigration theme also appears when Barry recounts his experiences in New York to Jenny. Despite her youth, Jenny, assumes that Barry was there for a long period because her collective memory tells her that this was so in many cases. Barry then tells her he was only there for three weeks, striking a comic note, since one of the resources of television comedy is to breach audience expectations.

On a personal level, there are three components in the formation of identity: a psychological, social and symbolic component (Woodward, 1997:13). Gilroy (1999:318) observes that "the differences appear with the self, which is not a unitary entity but changes constantly in its interaction with others". In any case, this individual identity derives from the dominant institutions, which are a source for the creation of identities (Castells, 1997:7) and it is maintained by means of social and material conditions (Woodward, 1997:12).

Michael is another of the characters of "Bachelors Walk", a lawyer who tries to keep his life simple and who has a relationship with Jane. Michael's attitude to his flatmates reflects many of the stereotypes of male relations: the friends play cards, drink and smoke together and their mutual confidence seems to be based on the jokes and tricks they play on each other more than anything else; however, none of them speak to each other about their personal worries or problems. His attitude to Jane is of course quite

different. This difference between the kinds of relationship established with members of the same and the opposite sex is also seen in the way Raymond, the serious one, talks to Alison, the new resident, about his relationship with his ex-girlfriend just returned from New York, rather than with his male friends, whom he has known much longer.

Translating the identity of fictional characters

Cinema and television reproduce real conditions in which attitudes have a social role and express people's behaviour. Let us take social role to be “persistent patterns of conduct and behaviour that are connected to the individual’s position in some social structure or organization” (Berger, 1991:48), bearing in mind that by “behaviour” Berger means the behaviour we expect of people, given their membership of certain groups or organisations. Fictional characters are defined in terms of these two components. Michael behaves in a certain way with his parents, in another with his fiancée, in another with his clients, and in another again with his flatmates. Berger (1991:47) defines the personal role of people's behaviour as the “various roles they assume in the conduct of their daily lives”, as already mentioned.

Fictional cinema or television characters often seem to have an independent life and personality of their own. This is a further example of the blurred dividing lines between fiction and reality which characterise the medium.¹⁰ Actors, of course, adjust their discourse to the scripts they are given. Goffman (1981) provides a classification model for the various types of speaker or writer:

animator (...) the person who is actually making the sounds, or the marks on paper.

author (...) the one who put the words together

principal (...) the one whose position is represented by words. (Goffman, 1981:144, quoted by Fairclough (1995:62))

When a text is translated, there is another voice to be added to the mix, that of the translator. This voice serves for incorporation of the original culture into the target culture. Cultural distance may call for modification of the identities of the characters due to the close link between the cultural references and the elements that enable the individual to be identified. Therefore, all the references associated to each individual

¹⁰ Lebel, 1971:70-74.

play an essential role in creating the identity of the character as decided by the series creator.

Subtitling and dubbing also differ in their treatment of cultural references. Whereas subtitling, due to the need for maximum textual condensation, tends to maintain the referent in the original text, in dubbing there is a tendency to naturalise it.

In a scene in the first episode, Raymond meets up with his old flame, Kate, and they recall the times spent together in that same place. One of the referents is “scone”, which could give rise to translation difficulties, since "scones" do not exist in all other cultures. If, for example the series were to be translated to Spanish or Catalan, a dubbed version might substitute some other similar item ("madalenas" or “magdalenes”, perhaps), but a subtitled version might well leave the original "scone", but marked by italics. The importance of this particular referent does not lie so much in the ingredients used to make it as its associated value of simplicity. In the context in which "scone" appears, the word and its associated values become a sign telling us the kind of relationship that existed between Raymond and Kate.

Conclusions

From the examples presented, we have seen that cultural references are linguistic elements with an ideological content which follow patterns of use just like other linguistic elements (syntax, phonology and vocabulary) with the final objective to portray the kind of competences to be taught in translation curricula. Cultural references have been studied in Critical Discourse Analysis as a means of revealing the stereotypical linguistic interactions which conform patterns of use in language. In addition, cultural references are associated to certain values which are, in turn, related to given ideologies.

In this article, I have highlighted how cultural references can create given identities for the fictional characters who use them. These identities derive from the viewers' knowledge. The discourse participants know the linguistic codes, the principles and norms of language use, and they have the appropriate knowledge of the situation and the world. Therefore, the viewers relate the characters with certain identities on the basis of the information deriving from cultural references.

The question, when translating, is whether the values transmitted by the referents can be reproduced in the target culture. The translator's voice is now added to those of the animator, author and principal, all of which are related to a given identity which cultural references have contributed to shaping.

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