

Filmmaking: Cultural Referents, Terminology and Identity

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1. Describing cultural references within audiovisual fiction programs

Within translation studies, cultural references have been widely debated because of the impact translations make on a target culture. Above all, researchers have focused on the conflicts that arise from the relationship between diverse cultures that often have very little in common but are nevertheless brought together by translation.

The premise in this article is that the aim of cultural references is to give information about characters in movies through the emotive/expressive function they fulfill (Santamaria, 2010). Thus, the approach will be to examine how the public infers information about the characters' identity: the topics we talk about, each one's referents, create for our listeners social representations that have the capability to build a given construct of our identity.

We will be looking at referents from the final episode season 1 of the TV series *Grey's Anatomy*, «Who's Zoomin' Who?». This chapter has been chosen to help us to prove that cultural referents and terminology play a similar role in fiction programs. According to ABC, the producer channel of the soap opera, the plot of the episode analyzed is the following: «Seattle Grace Hospital is overrun with secrets, sex and syphilis. Cristina Yang puts it perfectly, "The only thing that spreads faster than disease is gossip." Everyone has a secret. There are secret phone calls, secret lovers, secret surgeries and the biggest secret of all—a secret spouse... ». Characters' attitude to truth and falsehood will help us to understand their identities.

For the purposes of this article, cultural references will be analyzed in groups. They will not be considered individually since the aim is to see how, when combined, they contribute to a description of the film's characters and their dramatic settings. As TV viewers, we tend to resort to beliefs taken for granted but in this series the cinematographic script often challenges them. As a consequence, the production of

stereotypes is barred and the knowledge we have acquired through collective memory is shattered when we watch, for instance, that a prestigious doctor, Derek Shephard, is incapable of telling the truth and for some chapters does not let his new partner, Meredith Grey, that he is a married man.

From the bumper of the series, it becomes clear to the audience that the plot will cover medical events and love affairs. Therefore different sets of objects and garments are shown: medical shoe covers are arranged together with red high heel shoes; medical scissors are shown, one of which is picked by a woman and turns into an eyelash clip; a sexy black dress a man is helping a woman to zip blurs into the image of a woman helping a man to tie the laces of a medical gown; serum dripping becomes a drink filling a cocktail glass; and a hospital bed is shown with a man a woman on it. It becomes clear to the audience what kind of a series they are going to watch. The public will be told about the work done by doctors and nurses in a hospital, and simultaneously the audience will learn about their personal lives. The image shows different daily objects available to the general public –cultural references– and medical objects –with a precise vocabulary, terms– and the combination of them helps to recreate a given dramatic setting. As viewers we accept that doctors and nurses use a specific jargon, thus conveying certain stereotypes about their behavior, but in *Greys' Anatomy* their personal life will also be uncovered. Scriptwriters help viewers to identify the fictional characters' profession within the dramatic settings in which they appear, and medical terms are scattered throughout the text.

In TV series and films, the information is conveyed to viewers through different cinematographic codes and channels. The terminology coupled with the cultural references fall within this context. These elements are helpful when there is a desire to characterize the dramatic setting, since the public can check that the situation takes place among doctors, lawyers or engineers. It is for this reason that the terminology and cultural references in the genre of the fictional film and television share the same goal.

Indeed, certain fictional characters, with the aim to convince the audience that that character is indeed a doctor or a lawyer, use terminological units. In some cases these terms are also used when the objective is to stress the relationship between fiction and reality. For instance, if the film or series director wants to point out that one of the characters is pretending to be someone else, a technique that can be used to emphasize

this falsehood is to make him/her have some difficulties in understanding or grasping the meaning of the specialized discourse or the failure to use it him/herself.

In this specific chapter, most of the terminology is explained, either because the patient asks for clarification, or because the interns prefer to employ the expressions used by the general public. Through this inappropriate choice, it becomes obvious that they are young, not completely trained and still a little bit too naughty.

Another scene also underlines the different attitudes of doctors and interns. Bourdieu (1984) recognizes an ideological component in the preference for different kinds of food. He points out the fact that working classes in Western societies do not consider fish to be an adequate food for men because it is not filling enough. Instead, Bourdieu says that men prefer meat while women have a preference for salads and vegetables. The choices of different characters in the canteen can also show the different personalities scriptwriters wish to create. Two of the interns, Cristina Yang and Izzy Stevens decide to practice a non-authorized autopsy. Their action contradicts their usual manners. They are known for trying to learn as much as possible. In consequence they never break the hospital rules out of the fear to be disqualified. At a given point of the episode we can see them planning not to follow the regulations for once since they deeply believe, as it is proved later, that the autopsy is totally necessary. The scene shows them eating pizza while sitting on a stretcher inside what looks like a stockroom. From the pizza we can infer that they are in their dinner break, but the social representations of pizzas are not the same in the US and Spain. Spanish viewers might think that, as future doctors, they should have a healthier diet, while in the States pizzas have a different connotation.

According to our approach, cultural references can also be considered as commodities linked to a particular ideology. For example, Stallybrass (1999) asserts that clothes are not only objects to cover our bodies with, but that there exists a close relation between costumes and the social groups that wear them. For example, the Incas used to give clothes to the inhabitants of the areas they conquered and those garments then became a sign of the inhabitants' duties and commitment to the state. Clothes also play an important role in *Grey's Anatomy*. We can see the main characters of the series within the hospital in medical scrubs, from which we can tell whether they are senior doctors, interns, nurses or nursing assistants.

Some social constructs are also ideological, although they cannot be considered as commodities, in a more restrictive meaning of the term. Historic settings and place names will be included in this group. Herb (1992) states that «monuments, settlements, and other places are concentrated nodes and circuits of memory». Therefore, it was not easy for Germany to come to the decision to make Berlin its capital, because the mere sight of this city still evoked memories of Prussian militarism and recalled the events that took place there during the Nazi period. Herb (1992) affirms that «the significance of these places (nationalist spaces) 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)».

In the process of translation, the elements associated with the referents that are part of the collective memory of individuals from the source society are not usually conveyed successfully unless the translator includes more information. All cultural references are linked to a given set of values in the natural environment where they were produced. However these values may not be the same in the target culture. In those instances, it is not easy for the translator to make a decision about what information to add. In the case of place names it is even more difficult to determine what information to include in order to appropriately transfer the values associated with the place name in the source culture. At the beginning of the chapter examined, Derek Shephard decision to move from New York City to Seattle, Washington, is faced up to in what turns out to be an anticipation of the presence of his wife at the end of the episode. In fact, he has never told anyone that he is married and that the decision to move was due to his wife infidelity with one of his best friends. For the American public it might be more apparent that New York City is a better place to live and work as a surgeon, but the Spanish public will encounter difficulties to make the same deduction.

2. Defining characters

From the following definition of identity we will explain how characters are defined, a piece of information the translator has to bear in mind during the process of translation:

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 created from his/her

experiences and the meaning he/she applies to these experiences. From this premise we can deduce that, through a cognitive process, the individual recognizes his/her action patterns and adjusts his/her acts accordingly. For this reason we can say that identity then is both social and personal. This same postulate can be applied to fictional characters, because viewers can interpret what they see on the screen as a result of the cognitive capacities they have developed during life. One of the main characters of the series is Miranda Bailey, a successful surgeon with very strict manners towards the interns and for this reason her nickname is «The Nazi». Nevertheless when she discovers Cristina Yang and Izzy Stevens performing the forbidden autopsy and although she first threatens them, at the end she helps them both since she recognizes that their action will help to improve the health of the daughter of the man on whom the autopsy was performed. Once more the identity of Miranda Bailey will be modified, since the public of the series will realize that she is strict but only for the benefit of the interns and just because she cares about them.

The two following premises can help us to examine how characters' identities are created:

1. Texts are produced in social contexts and the language highlights the social relations. Cultural references and the terminology used in feature films and series therefore play a role in this process of identification.
2. Because translation is a cultural operation, it also affects our perception of identities, since they have a social component.

As far as 1. is concerned, characters in films prove to be useful to check the different identities subjects may have. Hall (1996) states that identities arise from discursive practices. Indeed, the characters' use of language in fiction texts has a very clear function, which needs to be reproduced through translation.

With regard to (2), Woodward (1997:2) considers that the relation between cultural references and terms is the following:

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

According to Tajfel (1981), identities are also social:

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)

Thus, we can consider that the intrinsic necessity of humans to belong to a community (Berger and Luckmann, 1995:41) is the basis for the individuals to construct their identity, and, by exclusion, the identity of others. Although we belong to more than one community (Berger and Luckmann, 1995), we sometimes select one with which we more strongly wish to be identified and with which we retain a highest identification.¹ We can observe this ambivalence in different characters of this episode and the lies every one is trying to hide underline their identities. For instance the intern George O'Malley is presented as a introverted and inhibited person: he has syphilis and even so is reluctant to talk to the doctors who could help him, although we might take for granted that he is accustomed to seeing naked bodies; Owe Hunt, the Chief of Surgery, is almost sure he has a tumor but is unwilling to ask for help just in case he loses his position; and Preston Burke tells his friend Bill that he is not the father of the baby his wife is expecting, although as a doctor he would have considered not to explain this fact.

As acknowledged above, characters in films and television allow us to better comprehend the multifold identities subjects can have. Cultural references and terminology play a crucial role in the identification process. We have to bear in mind that, as stated by Hall (1996), identities are an integral part of our discursive practices, and from this premise we can note that the process of identification is never completed. On the contrary, it is constantly regenerated.

3. The translation of characters' identities in fiction texts

Identification of characters through their dramatic setting is made possible by a cognitive process. Fairclough (1995:33) discriminates among four knowledge types essential for all speakers:

1. Knowledge of the linguistic code.
2. Knowledge of the principles and norms of linguistic use.
3. Knowledge of the situation.

4. Knowledge of the world.

Consequently, in the reassignment process that takes place during the translation process, we can identify dissociation between the knowledge shared by the original text's readers or film viewers and the target text's readers or film viewers.

Regarding the knowledge of linguistic codes, the translator has to bear in mind that the verbal expression itself has an ideological component. Its origin can be found in the cultural peculiarities of each society and each social group. As a consequence, linguistic codes may have different meanings in both the source culture and the target culture. Miranda Bailey' language with the interns is severe but her attitude is to help them as much as possible. The translation of her lines must then show her harmless harshness.

Regarding the knowledge of the principles and norms of linguistic use, these parameters are different in each language, or even in each linguistic variety. Since, in screen translation, only the verbal codes of the oral channel are translated, it is quite usual that a given set of social behaviors, when they are not linguistically expressed, may be difficult for the target audience to grasp. The body attitude of the different characters in love must be conveyed by an accurate choice of words in translation or their feelings might be misunderstood.

The knowledge of the situation and the world described in media production is highly culturally determined as shown by the meaning behind of the place names found in this episode. This explains why it is sometimes so difficult to translate certain cultural references and the communicative function of the terminology used because both are indispensable for a correct identification of the discourse. Thus, to retain the social representation of the source text the referent was able to create for its source public, the target audience has to be able to associate it with its own cultural milieu, before giving it the sought after ideological value.

The kind of knowledge needed (knowledge of the linguistic code, knowledge of the principles and norms of linguistic use, knowledge of the situation and knowledge of the world) to correctly interpret a text explains why translation becomes more difficult the more remote languages are. At the same time, however, viewers can also consider that people from other cultures/societies behave strangely despite the fact that they may

share the same language because of the prejudices and stereotypes shared by different social groups.

3. Conclusions

Translators must act as cultural mediators to provide the necessary information for the target text's viewers. They become the bridge between the original text and the target viewer, who may only be able to obtain the necessary information about the characters via the cultural transfer that the translator produces.

In this same line, the translation of the terminology in these situations has to take into account the communicative aim the original had in mind, and then reproduce it according to the new aim the translation wants to fulfill. Thus, it is not essential for the translator to find the most adequate terminological equivalent from the point of view of the specialized knowledge. Instead, the translator has to be able to find the equivalent that best suits the communicative objective, i.e. the expressive function to re-present the fictional character the original wanted to construct and convey.

4. Bibliography

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¹ Van Dijk (1998:120). This author prefers to use “identification” rather than “identity” since the first term is not as static as the second, and shows the possibility of change on[E] can encounter in societies.