

Ideological implications of translation decisions: positive self-and negative other presentation

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Abstract

This paper will present considerations on how translation decisions regarding culture-bound institutional terms influence the portrayal for the target culture (and thus at least in part the target readers' perception) of the institutions referred to, and indeed by extension of the culture to which they belong. The issues will be illustrated using several examples drawn from a corpus of texts relating to Spain taken from the British press. This corpus forms the basis of a wider-ranging study of the portrayal of Spain in the British press from a critical discourse analysis perspective, of which translation-related issues form a part.

The paper will analyse how decisions taken in translation solutions can introduce ideological elements, in particular positive self—and negative other—representation, which reproduce and reinforce myths or stereotypes existing in the target culture regarding the source culture.

Key words: Translation of institutional terms, translation of cultural references, media, stereotypes.

Resum

Aquest article presenta un seguit de consideracions sobre la manera com determinades solucions a l'hora de traduir termes institucionals influencien la visió que la cultura d'arribada pugui tenir de les institucions a què es fa referència, i per extensió de la cultura a la qual pertanyen. Per demostrar-ho es val d'exemples extrets d'un corpus d'articles de premsa britànica que tracten d'Espanya. Aquest corpus constitueix la base d'un estudi més ampli sobre la imatge d'Espanya a la premsa britànica en el qual s'aplica l'anàlisi crítica del discurs i on s'integren aspectes relacionats amb la traducció.

L'article analitza el fet que certes solucions de traducció tenen repercussions ideològiques, sobretot a partir de la representació d'un *jo* (cultura d'arribada) positiu i d'un *altre* (cultura de partida) negatiu, que reproduïx i reforça el conjunt de mites i d'estereotips que sobre la cultura de partida s'han produït en la cultura d'arribada.

Paraules clau: traducció de termes institucionals, traducció de referències culturals, mitjans de comunicació, estereotips.

Recent research trends in critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis have paid considerable attention to media texts and how the use of language contributes to maintaining social consensus regarding dominant ideological positions, and thus the interests of the dominant groups in society. Some researchers (see for example the work of Van Dijk (1987, 1988, 1991, 1993), Fowler (1991), Clark (1992), Simpson (1993)) have paid particular attention to the role of language in the construction of social consensus regarding «out-groups»: youth, homosexuals, foreigners, immigrants, or women who, despite forming more than half of the population in most cases, are still a «minority» in terms of discrimination. Of special interest for us as translators is the construction of foreigners and foreign cultures, given the translator's much vaunted role as an intercultural mediator.

In this paper we shall discuss the translation of culture-bound terms in the media and ask how the translation decisions taken can influence the construction of the source culture for the target culture, and thus the perception of the source culture for the target reader. We believe that the translation decisions taken often serve to reinforce and perpetuate stereotypical constructions of the source culture, thus preventing, rather than furthering, intercultural understanding. We will use in our discussion examples taken from a corpus of articles on Spain in the British press. This corpus forms the basis of a wider-ranging study of the portrayal of Spain in the British press from a critical discourse analysis perspective, of which the translation-related issues discussed here form a small part.

Before going on to consider the specific examples from our corpus, let us briefly mention some of the specificities of media language pertinent to our subject. The first of these is the characteristic normally termed «embedding», that is the use of existing texts (for example quotes, news agency bulletins, official communiqués) in the writing of articles for publication. This tendency should be considered in combination with another: that of the editorial processes most media texts, and certainly all news texts, go through, eliminating to a great extent the concept of a single author. Articles may go through as many as five or six different pairs of hands before final publication, and each of those may change terms, order of elements, etc. (Bell, 1991). These two characteristics make it difficult to pinpoint in many cases when, where and by whom the decision regarding the final (published) translated version of a term is taken. What we can be sure of is that the editorial filter will almost certainly eliminate any term considered to be contrary to the editorial policy of the newspaper concerned. See for example Trew (1979) for the analysis of the different reporting of the same incident from two different ideological positions.

A final point we would like to make here is that the translations of terms published in the press are not usually carried out by professional translators, but by journalists. In the course of their work, they receive news bulletins in their own language from news agencies, news in the source language from the local media, local fellow journalists, or even news in other languages from other

sources, from which they write their articles. Some of the terms they use to identify source culture institutions and other concepts will be established terms in their paper and often published with other stylistic rules or recommendations in the form of a style book, others will come from one of the sources they have available, others they will coin themselves. The quality and effect of this process, like so many others, depend to a great extent on the knowledge the journalist has of the source culture, on her image of her ideal reader and that reader's knowledge of the source culture (Hall *et al.*, 1978), on her intuitive ability as an intercultural mediator. Of course, much of this can also be applied to professional translators, amongst whom there is considerable disparity of quality. It is, however, true that today many professional translators have received formal training in their profession, training which normally includes courses designed to ensure knowledge of the source culture as well as courses designed to ensure awareness of the translator's role as an intercultural communicator.

This is not to say, naturally, that no journalist takes these aspects into account. There are some excellent professionals. Unfortunately, however, there are also journalists who simply seem not to have sufficient knowledge of the source culture to do their job. The *European* of 16th April 1992 speaks of the ruling socialist party in Spain at the time as the «*Partido Socialista de Obreros Españoles*» instead of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*; the *Daily Telegraph* of 8th April 1992 calls Franco's *Movimiento* «a Spanish fascist movement», the use of the indefinite article implying the existence of other contemporary fascist movements in Spain; the *Independent* of 27th April 1992 tells its readers that the General Workers' Confederation (CGT) is the second largest union in Spain, either confusing the large socialist *Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT)* with the small anarchist *Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT)*, or confusing Spanish trade unions with those of other countries. The *Daily Mail* of 30th March 1995 goes as far as to state that Spain's Constitution was given to it by «Hitler's friend, the dictator Franco». This error of fact fitted in very well, of course, with the negative image of Spain which the paper was trying to portray in this article, published during the turbot dispute between Spain and Canada in March and April 1995.

Our hypothesis, confirmed to a great extent for Spain in the study we mentioned above, is that the British press consistently reproduces and hence reinforces stereotyped images of foreign countries, thus maintaining domestic consensus on the «national interest»: in very over-simplified terms, by painting a negative image of foreigners and other countries, they imply that Britain is superior, and thus encourage nationalistic feeling which assures consensus. We are not suggesting that this is done consciously by journalists on any but very rare occasions. British journalists have been socialized in the same institutions as their readers, and hence share in general the consensual beliefs of their society (Fowler, 1991). Many of the stereotypes of other countries and other races are extremely well established and are very powerful, to the extent that the use of a single word can be sufficient to conjure up the whole stereotype (O'Donnell, 1994). Consider, for example, the use of the term «armada» ins-

thead of «fleet» for Spain's fishing boats during the halibut (and other) disputes. The journalist as a translator and the very few professional translators working in the media in Britain participate in this social process. The process is complex and may be witnessed in several different aspects of language use. Critical discourse analysts have studied transitivity, modality, lexical choice, etc. Within lexical choice, categorization and naming analysis have proved of special interest. In this paper, which deals with the translations given to culture-bound terms, we will limit our discussion basically to lexical choice, since transitivity and modality are of more application to the analysis of whole texts.

The first example we will examine is that of the Spanish term *comunidad autónoma* used to refer to the territorial units into which the State is divided in accordance with Spain's 1978 Constitution to satisfy (at least in part) demands for decentralization from several different parts of the country. The degree of decentralization to these *comunidades* is considerable, although not uniform. Some of them have control over education at all levels, health, environment, tourism, agriculture, fishing, their own police force, among others. The British press has long used the terms «canton», «department» and «Land» to refer to the internal political organization of Switzerland, France and Germany respectively. In the case of the organization of the State which Spain introduced in her 1978 Constitution, however, no single term is used. This very fact would appear to be an indication of the relative importance given to Spain by the British press. There is no particular reason why «autonomous community», as used indeed by specialist publications on Spain (see for example Hooper, 1995), could not be used specifically for Spain, but the British press has preferred so far to use the generic forms «region», «regional autonomies», «autonomous regions», which as glosses of the actual term are acceptable, but do not necessarily express the unique nature of the compromise solution found to Spain's longstanding internal national and regional questions, nor the degree of autonomy involved. To complicate the issue, however, these are not the only terms used. We have found instances of «states and regions», «historic nations»; worse still, within one article, we have found the concept translated by both the term «region» and the term «province», an even more confusing solution if we consider that Spain is also divided into provinces at a more local level of government. Similarly, the *Financial Times* reported on the elections held to elect the parliament of the autonomous community of Andalusia this year as «local elections», again misleading as there is also a municipal level of elected government. The result is a confusing image of the country, or indeed the image of a confused country for the reader.

A frequent translation solution when dealing with culture-bound institutional terms (Newmark 1988) is that of the use of «couplets» or «triplets», consisting in the use of the source term, and/or its literal translation, and a cultural or functional equivalent, or explanation of the term. This very useful procedure is popular in the press, as is paraphrase, whereby the concept is explained without actually making reference to the term itself. The writing of an explanation, however, opens the door to ideological interpretations of the reality of the

source culture, pointing the reader in the direction of the paper's «preferred meaning» (Hall *et al.*, 1978). Thus, for example, we find the *Estado de las Autonomías* described as «Spain's peculiar political system (17 autonomous regions which constitute a lesser-degree federation as established in the 1978 constitution)» in the *European* of 9th April 1992. Although «peculiar» can mean characteristic or exclusive to, this is not its first meaning, and certainly not when the adjective is used before the noun. The text implies thus that Spain is «peculiar», that is strange, not normal, not like «us». Or, on another occasion, the *consejero de Economía de la Junta de Andalucía* becomes «Jaime Montaner, councillor for economy and finance in the regional government, who is, in effect, Andalucía's minister for economy, trade, industry and tourism all rolled into one» in *The Times* of 15th April 1992. This rather condescending explanation, published alongside a photograph of a donkey pulling a hand-plough in a field, helps to reproduce the stereotype of Spain as a backward country. In a similar vein, *Fomento de Trabajo*, the Catalan employers' association, is described as «Catalonia's employers' club», giving a rather frivolous version of its activity. Backwardness and frivolity are two of the most frequent stereotypes of Spain and «Spanishness» (O'Donnell, 1994; Blain *et al.*, 1993).

One final example to illustrate the dangers of the use of explanations, whether in couplets or otherwise in the text. In our study we have found the following for the Spanish daily *El Mundo*. «*El Mundo*, a right-wing Madrid paper» (*The Times*, 4th May 1994); «lambasted from the populist left in *El Mundo*» (*Economist*, 25th April 1992). The ideology of *El Mundo* (admittedly not always immediately identifiable) changes depending on the message the paper in question wishes to transmit.

Another stereotype of Latin countries which we have found to be widespread in our study of the image of Spain in the British press is that of political extremism and instability. A case of a translation which reinforces this stereotype is the full and literal translation of the name of the very small and practically disbanded terrorist group Grapo, together with the adjectival explanation offered in the *Daily Telegraph* of 1st April 1992: «the fanatical Left-wing First of October Revolutionary Anti-Fascist Group, Grapo», and that in a text of no more than 60 words. Note the use of the capital letter in «Left-wing». Again in a *Telegraph* group paper, this time the *Sunday Telegraph* of 12th April 1992 we find a reference to «Spain's secret police» for a division of the security forces, which we believe carries sinister implications of not fully legitimate activity. On various occasions we have found the same implication of illegitimacy on the part of the security forces in the translation of the *Guardia Civil* as «Spain's paramilitary police force» (this, for example, in *The Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Financial Times* in May 1994, and also in the BBC2 documentary on Spain «The New Inquisition», broadcast in *Assignment* in November 1995). Although in its dictionary definition the term «paramilitary» need not have negative connotations, the reader of the British press will be hard put to find it used outside articles on terrorist activities, particularly in Northern Ireland.

In our functional approach to translation, we believe that aspects such as the transfer of powers to the regions should be clarified by the professional translator for her target culture readers, where lack of knowledge on the part of the target reader would make the text hard to understand; the same should surely apply to the journalist. But yet again, we find that far from offering clear explanations of the situation, the press's versions of the different levels of government and their respective responsibilities tend to produce distortion of information. Let us take, for example, the case of fishing, a field which frequently provokes conflict between Britain and Spain. Here we encounter the stereotype of cheating and lack of respect for rules. The *Daily Mail* of 23rd December 1994 gives the following information: «The government in Madrid does nothing to discourage such cheating. It employs only 17 inspectors to monitor its fishing fleet...». The latter is, of course, strictly speaking true. Fishing is one of the fields for which power has been transferred to some of the autonomous communities, specifically those with the largest fleets: Galicia and Andalusia, so the central government employs few fishing inspectors, the regions employ the vast majority of them.

Another frequent translation solution is the use of what Newmark (1988) calls «cultural equivalents». This procedure has the advantage of helping the reader to understand partially the concept, by using a term associated with the institution which fulfils a similar function in the target culture. It also, however, tends to gloss over differences, which may on occasion be fundamental. The result of this kind of procedure is to give the impression that the target culture system is to some degree universal, thus reducing the possibility of the dominant consensus regarding it being questioned. A case in point is the *Sun's* account of the hotel and catering staff strike in Spain at Easter 1992 (16th April 1992), in which it speaks of the police protecting establishments from «flying pickets» and «militants», terms very closely linked to British union activity and legislation, and a favourite target of this and other right-wing papers' criticism. It is, however, difficult to establish exactly how they fit into the Spanish trade union scene. As to the source culture, the use of this translation procedure prevents the reader from acquiring further knowledge of how it is organized, thus reinforcing, by omission, the established images. We have found references to the Spanish Bar, to Spanish Equity, to the Seville Drug Squad. Note that the use of capital letters further induces the reader to accept that these are not simply generics used to explain the concept, by implying that they are the proper names of the institutions referred to.

We have offered here only a few examples of how we believe the lexical choices and other solutions adopted in translation decisions negatively influence the target readers' perception of the source culture. We have deliberately not entered into considerations regarding the truth or falsity of the images: stereotyped images at best overgeneralize. Further, we have looked at examples of two industrialized countries, geographically not particularly distant from each other, who are partners in several international organizations and who share basically the same concept of democratic society. If the images reproduced for

friendly, neighbouring countries are these, what of more distant, more hostile states? This is not to say that translation decisions are always to blame in this respect, nor indeed that they are the only culprits: far from it. Our wider study, and many other authors' work show that the British press in general continually reinforces negative other stereotypes; other critical discourse analysts have examined language used in other contexts and found similar patterns. We do believe, however, that if part of the translator's role as an intercultural mediator is to bridge the gap between cultures, then she should be aware of the pitfalls of stereotypical images, and attempt to avoid them, where the communicative situation of the target text permits her to do so.

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The examples discussed are taken from the following British newspapers: *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The European*, *The Independent*, *The Economist*, of the months of April 1992, May 1994, and March and April 1995. One example also appeared in «The New Inquisition», *Assignment*, broadcast on BBC2 in November 1995.