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Do you speak "Culture"?

Zoe-Larisa BĂDOIU[1]

Translation plays a major part in nowadays society and not only. Ever since Antiquity, translation has represented a way in which cultures have merged and different mentalities and civilization aspects have been brought together. Yet this science did not always enjoy the status that it has now. There were beliefs according to which a translated text was only a degraded form of the original and, therefore, reading it was not encouraged. Translators' work was regarded with scepticism, as a mere imitation of the actual books. This paper aims at highlighting the importance of the cultural component in a translation. Many translators pay little attention to this dimension and the resulting texts seem to confuse the readers.

Key-words**:** *translation, culture, literature for children, submission, translatable texts, language*

1. Introduction

The concept of culture has been widely approached by many disciplines, each of them creating another component for it. This can only underline the fact that the term is so vast that it cannot be included in a single pertinent definition as some of its components might be lost in the process.

Moreover, the different approaches to culture highlight its complexity and therefore the difficulty of translating increases. Times and habits change due to the interference between cultures and most importantly, due to the phenomenon of globalization. Cultures rarely preserve their original values and traditions; the influences between one another are visible. This process can be encountered in everyday life aspects. People adopt features and behaviours from other places and combine them in an attempt to create a unique style.

Furthermore, as far as authors are concerned, they borrow, in the same manner, various elements in their texts from the writers they admire. These elements do not relate only to style, but to the actual themes and settings. Broadly, culture embodies everything that has to do with a community, from the way in which it is organized to beliefs and mentalities. The concept of identity is often associated to culture. Further on, I will present a dictionary definition of culture, to highlight the

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, zoebadoiu@gmail.com

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idea that a translator must take several things into account when translating this dimension. Culture is made up of various constituents, each being governed by its own laws and principles.

2. The definition of culture

As I have pointed out before, culture is defined in many ways. If we were to look for the word in a dictionary we would see that there is not only one definition, but several related to different facets of it. In my opinion, this situation can be interpreted as a result of the hybridization of cultures. The inability to provide a unique definition may appear from the distinct beliefs regarding what culture means. I am going to provide some of them:

a. "The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively"[2]
b. "The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society"[3]
c. "*Culture* consists of activities such as art, music, literature, and theatre. Movies are part of our popular culture."[4]
d. "A set of ideas, beliefs, and ways of behaving of a particular organization or group of people."[5]

What I could notice from the four definitions that I have selected randomly is the focus on the notion of "set". Culture is not simply one item, but a combination between all the concepts related to the idea of society. Moreover, everything surrounding it is centred on the individual and the products of his/her intellectual work. The conclusion at this point is simple. People create culture, yet culture shapes people. The relation is of interdependence. Without human beings, the products that are embodied in culture would not have existed. However, individuals do not live in a chaotic manner or disregarding norms, they develop within a civilization, they receive a certain education, and they observe specific values and traditions. Their biological heritage is enriched by culture.

[2] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture?q=culture.Accessed on the 15th of March 2014
[3] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture?q=culture. Accessed on the 15th of March 2014
[4] http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus/culture?showCookiePolicy=true. Accesssed on the 15th of March 2014
[5] http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/culture. Accessed on the 15th of March 2014

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3. Culture – a short overview

Yet culture does not raise difficulties just in terms of definition. An important issue is related to its translation. Mary Snell-Hornby in *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach*, deals with the translation of culture, i.e. its importance and limitations. At the beginning of her argumentation, she attempts to define it, so she quotes Ward Goodenough who states that:

> "[...] a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term." (Goodenough, in Snell-Hornby 2006, 39).

Culture is perceived as something that people must learn. The author emphasizes that becoming a cultured man one must be submitted to a process in which he/she relies on the "biological heritage", an evolution being required. If I were to consider the implication of this definition, I could extrapolate it to translation studies. Thus, I am able to say that if a culture is "learned", then a translator can adapt to what he/she translates by "learning" a new one in order to render it correctly. After all, the key word in this statement is "knowledge".

Knowledge can be acquired in many ways. One of the most important sources of knowledge is represented by books ranging from research studies to literary works. This argument leads to my second one. If the cultural dimension were left aside in translations, then an essential component in the process of learning would be lost. Culture assimilated from a text may not represent a pure experience *per se*, but it is at least intriguing. Once a reader has come across something of interest s/he will be determined to look for more. A book is only the starting point in every discovery.

Furthermore, translation should be regarded to some extent as a mutation of a text from one cultural background to another. Susan Bassnett is one of the scholars who points out the importance of translating literature having in the background the cultural setting:

> Translation plays a major role in shaping literary systems, translation does not take place on a horizontal axis, the translator is involved in complex power negotiations (mediating between the cultures as if) the translation is always a rewriting of the original. (Bassnett 2007, 14)

Therefore, one of the common ways through which cultures converge is translation. It enables not only the type of knowledge that I have discussed before, but also the

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contact between totally different cultures, religious and moral values across the world. This manner of discovering a culture has a major advantage. When reading, a person establishes the first contact with another culture. Of course the experience *per se* cannot be replaced, but a good translation creates an opportunity for the reader to reach places unknown to him/her.

4. Translating culture

Culture was many times neglected in terms of translation, as many translation theorists shared the same point of view, i.e. the meaning rendered is the most important and the cultural background comes second. Although attempts have been made at identifying a definite norm and many debates have taken place, the solutions for translating culture were few and they lacked argumentation.
The studies on translations were strongly linked to the morphological and semantic dimensions, but very little was said about the culture within the text. Questions that underline the idea whether the cultural items (e.g. names of places, holidays etc.) should be translated were raised.

Furthermore, texts do not consist only of words *per se*. Words have different kinds of meaning (denotative, connotative, figurative), wordplays that can be easily associated with cultural elements. Moreover, words, taken individually, do not provide the complete message. What matters according to some scholars, (e.g. Nida), is to have the bigger picture of a text when translating. Sometimes, one must read between the lines in order to reach the actual message of a text. Thus the text is structured in several layers that should be considered: morphological, semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and of course, cultural.

A word that we, as a particular community, perceive in a particular way can be perceived differently by other communities. Each culture shares a unique set of values, norms, mentalities, beliefs that combine. The result of this combination is an individuality that is very difficult to render. Each reality is an unknown territory for the translator; Voltaire states that we cannot completely understand, know, and appreciate a culture if we are not a part of it, because in our attempt to do so, our own ideas come into contact with those of another culture and they alter the experience.

If so, the translator's job is highly complex for he/she must render the cultural elements within a text without interpreting them. Each cultural aspect must be presented objectively. Thus, the reader has access to that culture without mediation and he/she can form his/her own ideas and opinions.

Furthermore, the general tendency in translation is a receptor-oriented one. So the ideal is to transmit the original, maintaining its essence and yet make it accessible and intelligible to the readers. In what follows, I will be dealing with several perspectives related to the cultural dimension in translations expressed by

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different scholars. The purpose is to demonstrate that little attention was paid to this field. Scholars mostly dealt with the semantic dimension of translation and culture was rarely a focal point in their discussions.

4.1. Culture vs. Language

"Translation gives us access to the literature of the world. It allows us to enter the minds of people from other times and places. It is a celebration of otherness, a truly multicultural event without all the balloons and noisemakers." (Wechsler 1998, 8)

This quotation is the perfect summary of what one should understand when the question related to the translation of culture is raised. Apart from the semantic component, any translation includes, to a certain extent, the cultural background of the source text. We cannot place the translation into a vacuum without taking into account its initial context as well because by doing so, we risk missing important and subtle details which create the frame of a text. Any type of literary text is designed as a complicated pattern where every piece is essential and every aspect has a certain characteristic that provides insight into the way a text should be interpreted.

A cultural component can be either explained in a footnote, or approximated in the target language. However, this approximation by means of a pseudo-equivalent might lead to misunderstandings. There are, of course, cases in which a cultural element can be transferred without changing its original meaning. For instance the song *"Tiptoe Through the Tulips"* (Rowling 1997, 34) that uncle Vernon sang could have been translated in Romanian by *"Floricele pe câmpii"* instead of "Pe vârfuri, printre lalele" (translated by Iepureanu 2011, 33, the official translation). In order to avoid an unnatural translation, some procedures can be used: semantic-equivalents, functional equivalents, reductions, expansions or paraphrases.

However these techniques do not entirely solve the issue of how culture can be translated more easily. Yet, despite the contradictory opinions concerning the culture, most of the theoreticians reached the conclusion that language cannot be translated by disregarding the cultural context. The relation between language and culture is founded on interdependence and, by acknowledging this fact, a translator can achieve high quality standards in his/her translation.

So the two parties involved in the process of translating must be dealt with treated equally. Language is one of the most important products of a culture. Every creation of the human mind has received a linguistic force by being named or described throughout language. So, culture is supported and shaped by language. The perspective indicates that translations should be accurate and precise; being able to move a cultural and linguistic background into another one, without altering it, represents a good translation. It is important to mention that this view appeared after texts were considered autonomous and the reader uniquely responsible for what

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he/she understands, that is, at the beginning of the discussion on whether translations should be regarded as a discipline or not.

Moreover, some of the expressions that can be found in a text are direct products of a given culture. Mona Baker, in *In Other Words*, discusses this issue:

> As well as the conventional meaning of words, each language also employs conventionalized expressions and patterns of conveying implicatures. In other words, in every language there will be conventional associations between certain linguistic patterns and certain inferable meanings. These patterns are identifiable and are sometimes recorded in grammars. (Baker 2001, 229-230)

What the theoretician states here can be considered as a sequel to the previous quotation. Language cannot exist on its own. The implicatures of certain statements are in fact traces of the cultural background of *that* speaker within *that* community. Very interesting is the fact that only some of these "patterns" are recorded in grammars. This indicates their constant adaptations to the changing reality and culture surrounding them. Furthermore, the constant enrichment and development of both culture and language indicates constant development. If the direction is set towards the reader, then it is imperative for the translator to keep up with the changes. These modifications prove that languages and cultures are alive and growing.

Therefore, according to Nida and Baker, as far as translation is concerned, the cultural dimension should not be neglected, on the contrary, it should be integrated within the process. In a literary text, language conveys the message; the cultural background and the setting represent the missing puzzle pieces in understanding the story.

This idea is partially shared by Venuti, quoted by Jeremy Munday, who identifies two strategies for this issue. On the one hand, the discussion is about "domestication" (Venuti, in Munday 2001, 146) and it implies that the cultural aspects must be embedded in the target language and values. Therefore the source culture is modified and adapted to the former.

Consequently, the culture which is adapted becomes a hybrid, as a result of this merger. Related to this, in cultural studies the debate is carried between high cultures and low cultures. The former tends to assimilate the latter. Should this situation occur, the culture that is translated may influence the translator to such a degree that he/she might fail to provide a good, natural translation.

The concept was tackled upon before by Antoine Berman who perceives this "domestication" as a negative aspect of translation. According to him, the text is somehow submitted to a "trial" (Berman, in Munday 2001, 149). There are two aspects to this remark. First of all, the target culture is faced with a totally new one that seems bizarre at the beginning. And secondly, the inability of the source culture to fit in the norms of the target one. In the first situation, the stress is on the target culture. Idioms, fixed, expressions, holidays are translated in such a way that they no longer correspond with the original, but they are melted in the new culture.

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In the second case, the inability results in hybridization, in which elements from cultures, source and target, are combined, confusing, to a certain extent, the reader. There is no clear delimitation between the two, so the coherence of the discourse is partially lost. Thus, Berman pleads for a "naturalization" (quoted in Munday, 2001) of the text and rejects the foreign component in translation.

On the other hand, the second concept is foreignization. This view was embraced by many theoreticians. It refers to the fact that culture cannot be adapted if the purpose is to maintain the original meaning and, therefore, the cultural features should be preserved as such. Two of the most important supporters of this point of view are Venuti and Schleirmacher. The latter, also quoted in Munday (2001, 147), asserts that: "the translator leaves the writer alone, as much as possible and moves the reader towards the writer".

What is relevant from this quotation is that the translator is not concerned only with rendering a message, but also with preserving the initial idea of the text and its cultural implications. Moreover, a shift occurs - the reader is pushed towards the writer as much as possible. This results in a certain intimacy with the text and its codes and messages. The reader does no longer have a mediator, the translator, to explain the cultural elements. He/she reads about them from an objective perspective and creates his/her appreciations and opinions.

Susan Bassnett also explains the importance of the cultural factor in translations. She argues that by taking into account the cultural background of a text, a clear perspective on the story is provided. By translating only the words within a text, we cannot hope to provide the entire meaning potential of a book. Many extra-linguistic factors are rendered and they need to be known for a better comprehension: "We wanted to draw attention to changes that we believed were increasingly underpinning research in translation studies, changes that signalled a shift from a more formalist approach to translation to one that laid greater emphasis on extra-textual factors." (Bassnett 2007, 13).

The view changed the way in which translations were perceived. They were placed on the same pedestal as literature, since they convey the same artistic emotion, meanings and culture. They became a ground for reaching other mentalities, traditions and communities.

The translator is sometimes regarded as playing an important 'social role' due to his/her duty of *translating* culture. His/her ability to preserve the cultural background is crucial in the understanding of a text.

4.2. "Translatable" *vs.* non-translatable texts

Mary Snell-Hornby approaches the idea of "translatable" texts (2006, 41). She upholds that culture cannot be always integrated. If a translator aims at rendering the entire cultural background then he/she will find himself/herself in the impossibility

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of translating anything. Therefore the cultural aspect dictates the degree of translation (definition of the term):

> "In other words, the extent to which a text is translatable varies with the *degree* to which it is embedded in its own specific culture, also with the distance that separates the cultural background of source text and target audience in terms of time and space. This 'scale of translatability' closely reflects the continuum of text types" (Hornby 2006, 41).

So, the more culture a text includes, the more difficult it is for it to be translated. By expanding this idea to the translator, he/she must not only show knowledge in terms of language, but also in terms of culture. The translator should perceive the culture in which he/she translates as his/her own. The new values and ideologies should be assimilated in order to provide a comprehensive insight into the source culture.

In other words, this is in a way a form of dominance of the source culture. The translator becomes somehow enslaved by it and tries to introduce it to the target audience in such a manner that it can be better understood.

4.3. Submission *vs*. dominance in translations

According to Wechesler, the translator's work is in a way similar to a tour guide's. By means of his/her works, the reader should be able to travel through space, time and cultures. He/she however must show devotion so that the translated text can perform the same function as the original. In this case, the translator is submitted: "To translate does, after all, mean "to lead, to transport people somewhere." The nicest side of submission involves the joys of devotion, admiration, service, humility" (Wechesler 1998, 28). The admiration in this respect is related to the work of art, whose beauty must be preserved regardless of the way in which it reaches the reader.

The dominance, in Robert Wechesler's point of view, is the process of translation interpreted as a re-creation of the original. In this case, the translator re-shapes the text in order to convey a certain naturalness to the message. However, his/her approach is founded basically on the idea that culture should be preserved in a translation. The latter one becomes the medium of crossing boundaries at an intellectual level.

4.4. Translating proper names

Translating proper names represents a difficult task for any translator. The choice whether to maintain the original or change it depends on several factors. For example, the *Harry Potter* series was translated in over sixty languages; the translators had to be very careful not to mislead the readers, but this happened

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nevertheless since many translators chose to provide an equivalent for the proper names in the target language.

The success that the books had was reflected also in the decision of producing eight films and seven games based on J.K. Rowling's story. The readers were now part of the audience for the movies. Within the motion pictures and games, the British names appear and if the translator of that country chose to change them, the confusion would emerge.

Therefore, what should have been a linear axis starting from the original, making one stop for the translation and then in its final destination the target audience, turned out to be three different points which are unified only by the story. The initial code was decrypted by the target languages in which it was transferred.

The only manner of explaining the choice to translate the proper names may consist in the fact that fictional literature is not as rigid as other texts, *i.e.* technical ones. Authenticity plays an important role in obtaining an enjoyable experience for the reader. Moreover, the ability to render elements that are invented by the author is of crucial importance, especially when it comes to fantastic or children's literature.

Returning to the translation of proper names, this is indeed a tricky task for any translator. When it comes to choosing the name for the character, authors usually provide some indirect information about the character. The name, along with the physical features, portrays a certain personality that should be observed by a translator. As far as the characters created by J.K. Rowling are concerned, their names indicate very important aspects about them, e.g.:

> (The name) "Albus", in Latin is "white". It is transparent for people with some Latin and can be interpreted in terms of his white beard, and – less obviously - his 'white' (that is, 'good') magic as opposed to the 'black' magic of the dark powers opposing him. [...] Minerva McGonagall, the head of Harry's house, has the name of the Roman Goddess of Wisdom [...] The strict teacher of potions, "Severus", has the Latin word for "stern" as his first name - and it reflects his personality. (Brøndsted and Dollerup 2004, 59)

Another aspect related to the proper names created or used by J.K. Rowling is represented by her taste for anagrams. When she gave Voldemort's real name she meant it as a riddle: "Tom Marvolo Riddle" – "I am Lord Voldemort" (Rowling 1998, 309). This anagram was very puzzling for many translators. Some of them chose to transform the character's name in order to provide an approximate anagram, case encountered in the Romanian translation as well: "Tomas Dorlent Cruplud" – "Sunt Lordul Cap-de Mort" (translated by Iepureanu 2002, 154).

I firmly believe that the names should be kept in their original form. Moreover, in the cases in which the name helps the reader to decode the character's personality and role within the storyline, a footnote is required for explanations. In addition to this, if the choice is to translate both the name and surname, then each

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should receive an equivalent so as not to render bizarre combinations. Also, an explanatory note about the equivalent can be used, providing more details about the origin of that particular name.

Yet the choice for the translation must be defended with pertinent arguments. When translating names, the translator must take into account all the aspects: the origin of those names, their relevance for the description of the character, etc.

Ioana Iepureanu decided to translate several of them. Many times she translated only the name or the surname and this resulted in a strange combination. For instance, Professor Severus Snape is Severus Plesneală, Oliver Wood is Oliver Baston and Neville Longbottom is Neville Poponeață. This variant seems appropriate for fantasy novels where almost every stylistic effect is possible, but having a name which is made up of an English term and a Romanian one is a combination that confuses the reader, especially when he/she learns from the original the actual terms used by J.K. Rowling.

However, these combinations are bizarre and may confuse the readers. When someone reads a British novel, he/she might expect to find British names, unless the author creates characters of a specific culture and indicates it clearly.

Another example in this respect is represented by the name of the street where Harry's relatives live: "Privet Drive" (Rowling 1997, 7). In the official translation, Ioana Iepureanu chose to translate the name by "Boschetelor" (trad. Iepureanu, 2011:5). In my opinion, it would be better in the context, namely the British setting, to preserve the English term "Privet" and provide a footnote where the localization of the street is explained. Thus the result will look like this: "Aleea Privet" (footnote: În original „Privet Drive" – o stradă din oraşul Little Whinging în Surrey. Comitatul se află în sud-estul Angliei).

The choice is to be encouraged also because a Romanian name seems to sound bizarre in the English atmosphere of the novel, and the reader should be gently introduced to the setting.

Other difficulties refer to the translation of names of holidays. An example is represented by the "Bonfire Night". The suggestion in this case is to preserve the original as well and add an explanatory note concerning the nature of the event and its significance to the British people: "Bonfire Night este o sărbătoare anuală dedicată artificiilor, în data de 5 noiembrie, când britanicii celebrează momentul în care în 1605 Guy Fawkes a fost oprit înainte să distrugă Parlamentul".

I think this a good alternative as opposed to the official translation. Ioana Iepureanu decided to translate this particular event as "Noaptea Artificiilor" (*Idem, Ibidem* 9). As far as I am concerned, this translation is not meaningful either for the British setting, or for the Romanian culture.

Furthermore, when someone reads a thrilling piece of writing he/she is immersed in the story, the conflict and setting, becomes part of the novel and therefore, by using the original term, the atmosphere does not change.

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5. Conclusions

What I have presented so far is only a small part of what culture represents. The focus of this paper is to plead in favour of translations that preserve the cultural dimension within the novels and which maintain the original atmosphere.

I firmly believe that by providing equivalents for each cultural aspect within a piece of writing, one risks ruining its original charm. Furthermore, for instance, if a Romanian person reads a book whose characters are British but enjoy similar traditions, because they were adapted, he/she might be confused. Moreover, the cohesion of the original text would disappear.

The variety of arguments brought by scholars in favour or against translating the cultural component indicates the difficulty in reaching uniformity. The choice remains in the hands of the translator.

Theoreticians do not provide actual solutions to the issue, but questions are asked and answers are seldom received. Probably the best way to avoid bizarre combinations of cultures in a text is to provide additional information for the reader in a footnote. In this way the original atmosphere is preserved and the audience can more easily make the connection between the facts. However, regardless of their divergent opinions, they reach a dead point when it comes to culture and, although some of them speak of "domestication", they acknowledge the importance of culture. Further on, they debate upon the impossibility of adapting the source culture to the target audience, and in this case the items must be preserved as such.

Yet, the field of Romanian-English contrastive cultures is still unexploited to its full potential and this paper discusses ways in which certain translators approach the cultural background; for me, it has stirred my interest in further translation work.

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