



CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND THE INTERTWINED RELATIONSHIP WITH CULTURAL MOBILITY

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to shed light on two prominent concepts: cultural translation and cultural mobility. This paper is an attempt to negotiate the definitions provided for cultural translation and bridge the latter with cultural mobility, as I believe that there is a relationship of intertwinement and interrelation between the two. This paper is also an attempt to trace some of the manifestations of the two concepts in literature, philosophy, and theatricality. I will follow an approach of negotiation and negation of the sum provided on the two problematic concepts.

Keywords: cultural translation, cultural mobility, mobility of ideas, translation

1. Introduction

Human history has been marked by a nomadic structure and mobility. Throughout history, we always learn about the many great adventures of heroes and how they discovered something new after leaving the static, boring, dull place they had been living in for a long time. Also, to learn about these adventures, we had to wait for somebody to translate these works and bring them to us on a plate of silver, or it could be only time and the very nomadic nature of human beings that does it all by contributing to this mobility of knowledge and ideas.

After the end of colonialism, many once-colonized people participated in a huge mobility beyond their home country's borders. Many of them moved to sister countries which once shared the same fate, while others moved to the once-colonizing countries. Hence, a great number of writers appear to be displaced out of their home countries. In this vein, writers such as Edward Wadie Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Salman Rushdie carved a place for themselves among the Anglo-American canons. The question is what they had to do to guarantee this place! The answer could be adjusting identity to serve the new habitat they chose for themselves, or maybe, calling for a slight or total cultural translation of the human capital.

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In this paper, we intend to shed light on and prove the intertwined relationship that governs cultural translation and cultural mobility. So, we divided the paper into different axes. We will start with the etymology of the two concepts under study from different perspectives. Then, we will bridge the two concepts, highlighting the possible relationship or relationships that exist between the two concepts. Then, we will talk about cultural translation and cultural mobility of human beings and ideas. We will as well give some examples from literature, philosophy, and performativity.

2. What is Cultural Translation?

Cultural Translation could be defined according to two different and broad fields, anthropology/Ethnography and Cultural/Postcolonial studies, as each sees this translation from a different perspective. First, anthropology sees this cultural translation as a rewriting of the text. On the other hand, postcolonial studies see cultural translation as a transposition of the text or the migrant.

2.1 Anthropology

For anthropology, cultural translation “usually refers to the act of describing for members of one cultural community how members of another interpret the world and their place in it.” (Conway, 2012, p. 21). When anthropologists visit other corners of the world, their work is mainly to report to their fellow citizens back home how other human communities live and perceive the world. This understanding of the world governs the way people lead their lives. The way a human community leads a life springs from many variables, such as geography, the climate, and history.

This is what makes one community different from another, and sometimes leads to misunderstandings and culture shocks. Even the language and symbols one uses in a community are different from those in another.

2.2 Postcolonial Studies

As for postcolonial studies, cultural translation “usually refers to the different forms of negotiation that people engage in when they are displaced from one cultural community into another, or it refers to the displacement itself.” (Conway, 2012, p. 21). Cultural Translation, as Bhabha defines it, is more of a process involving the movement of people (subjects and subjectivities) rather than the movement of texts (objects). In Postcolonial studies, cultural translation has to do with the people themselves and how they negotiate and negate the aspects of the culture of their host country as they migrate and mobilize.

2.3 What is Cultural Mobility?

In the 9th edition of Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, mobility means “1. the ability to move easily from one place, social class, or job to another. 2. The ability to move or travel around easily”.

Mobility is the movement one embarks on every day from one place to another. One may move and mobilize for different reasons from and to different places. It is against human

nature and instinct to stay still in one place. Greenblatt (2010) asserts that “*mobility must be taken in a highly literal sense. Boarding a plane, venturing on a ship, climbing onto the back of a wagon, crowding into a coach, mounting on horseback, or simply setting one foot in front of the other and walking.*” (250). Taking this quote into consideration, cultural mobility should be defined as every way that culture moves from one place to another, either in the form of books, paintings, or humans. Human beings are bearers of culture, so when they are moving from one place to another, they mobilize their culture with them as well.

2.4 Cultural Translation and Cultural Mobility: What Relationship(s)?

To understand this relationship between the two concepts, let us first study the following quotes: “*Where the emperor is, there is Rome.*” (Greenblatt, 2010, 10) and “*Where the fisc is, there is the empire*” (ibid, 11). These quotes prove that the aim of the Roman troops of colonization was not only military in nature, but it was more of a cultural mission that sought an absolute appropriation of its peripheries. We see that the Roman Empire associated its whole system and culture with the emperor and its system of taxation. But what is important is that the Roman Empire was aware of the fact that without mobility, there is no appropriation of the places under its reign.

In addition to this mission of translating places and inhabitants, the Roman Empire embarked on a mission of correction and coerced translation of the native people who resisted the culture of the empire. The fate of the resistant natives was that they were banished and deported to other Roman cities, so they would feel uprooted and consequently embrace the Roman Culture as the only available alternative.

2.5 Cultural Translation and the Mobility of Humans

Identity, being torn between fixity and mobility, pushes us to consider the ability of human beings to reject or embrace a translation of their essence as they go beyond their borders. Should people behave according to the habitat they live in or the one they come from? This question bears two answers between its folds. The first is that there are some people who are willing to embrace the new habits, beliefs, and behaviors of their host country/habitat, while others always feel in exile, no matter how much time they spend in their host country/habitat. When somebody mobilizes, they show a tendency towards either translatability or untranslatability.

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis (Saint Augustine) is the best example of a full cultural translation of humans. He is known to have Berber origins. Plus, North Africa was once an extension of the Roman Empire, whose goal was to appropriate all places under its control and culture. However, the mobility is undecidable in this case. The dominator as well as the dominated take part in mobility. The same thing could be said about once-colonized countries where the colonizer tries their best to appropriate the geography and the people by a physical mobilization of the colonizer’s culture. But once the colonizer leaves the colony, many of the native people feel displaced in their own homeland as they identify with the colonizer’s identity and culture. They become translated but in their own homeland. Hence, mobility leads to translation, and this translation leads to more mobility.

2.6 Cultural Translation and the Mobility of Ideas

Clifford (1988) focuses on the history of collecting, classifying, and displaying primitive art and exotic cultures. He argues that these authoritative collections are historically contingent and subject to local reappropriation. Anthropology contributes a lot to the process of mobilizing ideas cross-culturally, as the job of the anthropologist is mainly to tell other nations how foreign human communities perceive the world.

However, there are other ways of mobility of ideas. Today, the media plays a major role in mobilizing ideas beyond borders. But throughout history, translation was the main way of learning about other nations. One example could be the tradition in the Abbasid era when most of the Greek philosophy was translated into Arabic. Also, there is the example of translating One Thousand Nights into English so that the English-speaking communities can learn a lot about the Arabs. However, translation took many forms throughout history as the word-for-word translation was not enough to convey meanings and ideas that do not exist in the target culture. Therefore, translation took the form of adoption, inspiration, and so many other forms. All the variations of cultural translation are types of appropriation of the content of the text. In the following section, we will be discussing plantation as used by the Moroccan playwright Mohammed Qawti.

2.7 Plantation as a Mode of Appropriation

Plantation could be used synonymously with an absolute cultural translation, where the original text is distorted and deconstructed to be reshaped and rebuilt in the environment of the target culture. In this vein, Khalid Amine, Amine, (2011, p. 11), in the introduction to *Sidna Qdar*, defines "*plantation as the process of containing the original text seeking a semiotic transformation through reproduction.*"

Mhammed Qawti did not treat Samuel Beckett's *En Attendant de Godot* as a sacred text as he believes that the idea of waiting cannot be translated into Moroccan Arabic and Moroccan Culture the way that was treated in the original text. Hence, Qawti looked for a myth that would be synonymous with waiting for Godot. One myth that is famous in Morocco is the one where the pagan is hybridized with the sacred. This was the myth of waiting for Sidna Qdar on the twenty-seventh night of the month of Ramadan. The myth says that those who stay up all night praying will be rewarded by seeing a magical creature descending from the sky, granting wishes to the believers. The believers go to sleep and carry on their lives as Sidna Qdar never shows up.

One difficulty of this type of cultural translation is that the translator should be a master of his/her formal and colloquial language and a master of their own culture as well as the source culture. The translator should not treat the original text as sacred, especially at the linguistic level, as he/she is translating the content to suit the new environment. The translator should plant the text once again in a new soil and tend to it so that it grows into a text that is understood and embraced in the new culture as its own.

2.8 Other Examples of Appropriation of Ideas

Another example of appropriating ideas would be Alfarabi's book *On the Perfect State* which is a cultural translation of Plato's *The Republic*. Plato's ideas were culturally translated

and reshaped to suit an Islamic society that believes in monotheism. So, the reader of Alfarabi's *On the Perfect State* would feel as if reading a new version of Plato's *The Republic*. The idea of the philosopher king was translated into the perfect sultan who should be whole and perfect in body and soul. This perfect king or sultan for Alfarabi should be religious as well and is entrusted with protecting the Islamic heritage.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, mobility is embedded in human nature. This means that it might happen every day to every human being. This mobility leads to germane changes in the way one thinks and perceives the world. Hence, mobility is considered an engine of one's change of culture.

In other words, Mobility leads to cultural translation. Moreover, once cultural translation takes place, new mobilities come to the surface and emerge, which lead to more cultural translation. And henceforth it is a spiral process. As we have been discussing above, one notices that the concepts under study are interrelated and intertwined in nature. One leads to the other, and one is the cause of the other, while sometimes it is the result of another. Cultural mobility leads to cultural translation, and the latter in turn generates more cultural mobility. It is more effective to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of the two concepts rather than attempting to determine which one comes first. Cultural translation is produced by cultural mobility, and new forms of mobility are produced by translation. The two are mutually reinforcing processes that shape and reshape one another in an ongoing cycle rather than being distinct. Their mutual reliance emphasizes how culture is dynamic in general, always changing and translating.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Aimane Jannat is a PhD candidate in Translation Studies. My research focuses on cultural transmission through translation, particularly English–Arabic literary translation.

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