DIS/PLACING TERRITORIES OF IDENTITY IN TRANSLATION

Lucía V. Aranda
University of Hawaii (EE.UU.)

ABSTRACT

In translation change is effected not only in a quantitative and tangible way but in a qualitative and intangible one as well. The linguistic and cultural differences that translation realizes in the process of rewriting oftentimes displace identities and project into them new singularities. As translation facilitates the creation of new territories of identity, the existing ones must evolve as host languages and cultures, which can lead to imbalances of power. How translations introduce these changes and the manner in which identities react as a consequence are the object of this essay.

KEYWORDS: Translation, identity, linguistic imbalances

RESUMEN

En la traducción, los cambios se producen no sólo de forma cuantitativa y tangible sino de manera cualitativa e intangible también. Las diferencias lingüísticas y culturales que la traducción desarrolla en el proceso de reescritura significan, a menudo, un desplazamiento de identidades y la proyección de nuevas realidades. A medida que la traducción crea nuevos territorios de identidad, los primeros han de evolucionar a anfitriones de lenguas y culturas, dándose instancias de desequilibrio de poder. Este artículo se centra en cómo las traducciones introducen estos cambios y la manera en que reaccionan los territorios de identidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Traducción, identidad, desequilibrios lingüísticos

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a common assumption that national identities are homogeneous, oftentimes grounded in biological, ethnic or racial considerations and "manifested in a particular language and culture" (Venuti 2005: 177). In the act of translation, as new spaces come into focus, identities are displaced and replaced with new territories. It is how these territories of

identity become altered in the target text itself, the politics of dissemination and the reception that center much of the dialogue in translation studies today.

I will be considering territory as a crossover between nation and identity, the physical and metaphysical space with which each person identifies. It is in the territory of language, literature and culture where, as Spivak (2000) explains, we make sense of ourselves, not necessarily our origins. The hybrid discourse that results from translation shifts identities, and creates new ones as it displaces older ones. Following are operations of the text showcasing the creation, elimination and changes of territories of identity as a result of translation.

2. IDENTITY

Translations are motivated by a variety of reasons: economic, quest for knowledge (cultural, literary, scientific, etc.) or the desire for power. Translation can facilitate the creation of a territorial identity, even to the point of demarcating geographic limits. As territories translate 'great' works of art, their own status grows. Such is the case of Catalonia during the 20th century, Germany during the 18th century or England in the 15th century who built a national literature as they translated what is frequently called higher literature. The reasoning seems to be that being in the (linguistic) company of admired work promotes, legitimizes and validates the incipient literature and idea of nation. While it is generally assumed that high literature is more difficult to translate than popular fiction because of the literary conventions the former breaks, the impact of translation at any level cannot be taken lightly. In fact, Gupta (1998) notes the salience of a "middle range" literature in India and its impact on the sense of identity. The breadth of this "literature that deals with everyday life in a simple realistic manner" in India is so great that Gupta states that its translation can in fact be considered "an act of community, an act of nationalism" (Gupta 1998: 178).

Certain geographies and geographical moments allow for translation more easily than others. The commerce along the Silk Route fomented cultural exchange between China and India, as did the confluence of Arabs, Jews and Christians in 12th and 13th century Spain. After four hundred years of Portuguese presence in Macau, both Chinese and Portuguese have become official languages. Here the redefinition of cultural and linguistic space is highly visible.

As translation allows for the creation of a national identity, it splinters the existing territorial identities and destabilizes notions of physical place. In Hawaii, between 1834 and 1948, 168 newspapers publish literary translations into Hawaiian to build literacy. As Bacchilega and Arista explain: "this

production of translated literature while seemingly attempting to blur the boundaries... in fact also solidifies their difference –their separateness and the power relations supporting it" (Bacchilega and Arista 2007: 175). In the first issue of *Ka Nupepa Kuoko,* Henry M. Whitney explains that the newspaper will be publishing material to "enable Hawaiians to think, feel, act and live more like foreigners" (in Bacchilega and Arista 2007: 175). As Hawaiian is placed in a translated territory, English will articulate a new identity. (Needless to say, the 50th anniversary of statehood in 2009 is not marked by everyone in the same manner.)

Given that cultures are highly untranslatable and "in-between" spaces (Homi Bhabha 1994: 38), translations have the capacity of creating and displacing meaning and place. The translation of the Waitangi Treaty in 1840 done in one night by Rev. Henry Williams displaced Maori sovereignty and handed it to the British almost overnight (Fenton and Moon 2002: 25). At issue are the translation of cultural concepts as well as the mode of translation. New Zealand would become part of the British Empire largely because of how the concept of 'possession' and 'sovereignty" were translated, the reception of the treaty and the manner in which the treaty was ratified. Although Williams was aware of the fact that the Maori was an oral culture, records show that as Williams gathered the chiefs to read them the treaty, he "interpolated the text with oral explanations" without covering "the important wider intent of the treaty" (Fenton and Moon 2002: 38). The British ultimately called for a new translation not only because the translation was presented to the government as the original treaty but because it was in "execrable Maori" (Fenton and Moon 2002: 40).

The fragility and negotiation of equating territory and identity is well exemplified in the change Macau has recently undergone. After four hundred years of Portuguese presence, English is now taking over the territory once occupied by Portuguese in a reallocation from post-colonialism to neo-colonialism. The shift from Chinese-Portuguese translation to Chinese-English, driven by economic reasons, is generating social change and altering social values (Meifang and Chen 2004).

3. LANGUAGE IMBALANCE

Individuals, governments, and cultures translate because languages are different. But more than the distance between the languages, it is the power differential between the two that will determine the translation project, the point of view, and the strategies. This is why in postcolonial situations in which one language yields greater power, a balanced translation tends to be more unfeasible. The representation of the vertical translation as occurring between

language pairs of unequal status (Catalan-Spanish or Hawaiian-English) and a horizontal translation (German-French) as occurring between languages of equal status is telling. The power differential between Hawaiian and English predates the overthrow of the monarchy. As Kimura (in Silva 2004: 12) explains "Whenever Hawaiian is translated into English, the English words used add cultural connotation to the idea conveyed, while eliminating intended connotations and meanings of the original Hawaiian." In fact, translation can actually defuse the subversiveness of the original as is the case of Rabindranath Tagore's work translated into English or the Zapatistas' into Spanish.

Imbalances of languages besides being political deal with surface elements such as the vocabulary size or number of genders. As Gupta (1998: 174) notes: "It is the particular interactions among these various attributes of language that differ from one language to another which cannot be easily reproduced in translation."

4. OPERATIONS OF THE TEXT

The more tangible effects of translation are present in the text operations themselves. It is usually assumed that scientific or technical translations do not suppose a realignment of identities; however, non-literary translations are not immune to cross-cultural imbalances. One example is Bethell et al.'s study on bias in assessing health care surveys translated from English into Spanish and identifying what is "not relevant to a certain cultural group or that cannot be communicated clearly" (Bethell et al. 2003: 15). What the authors ultimately found was that "translating surveys from one language to another can lead to measurement issues and analytic inaccuracies" (Bethell et al. 2003: 16). According to their study, problems stem from the lack of lexical equivalence; the inadequate transfer of "tone, language, lingo, and connotations" from the SL to the TL; the longer length of the TT due to word inflation; and actual errors in translation (e.g. "hot dog" as "warm puppies"). Furthermore, because of the difference between dialects, the authors recommend translation into the various Spanishes in the United States to target appropriate choices. Among their recommendations is that "When surveys are administered in multiple languages, comparisons of health care quality across linguistically diverse populations should be restricted to concepts that can be translated in consistent ways across these linguistic groups" (Bethell et al. 2003: 20).

Avoiding imbalances in the perception of identities is one of the dictates of translation, written, audiovisual or otherwise. However, constraints such as in subtitling can affect not only textual operations but the interpretation of interpersonal relationships as well. According to Hatim and

Mason, if the translational operations in subtitling look to relay similar transcultural politeness patterns, this will be only possible with a certain "degree of linguistic modification at the level of texture" (Hatim and Mason 2000: 433). A case in point is Hickey's study on the perception of politeness which reveals that Spanish readers (positive-politeness) hardly perceive the negative-politeness of the English original (Hickey 2000: 238). After comparing reactions to politeness by Spanish natives, English natives and Spanish-English bilinguals of selected passages of David Lodge's *Therapy* in the original English and in its Spanish translation (*Terapia*), Hickey wonders if translators should not "impose some kind of illocutionary dimension on the TT, so as to show that what is going on in the ST is politeness, however different source-culture politeness and target-culture politeness may be" (Hickey 2000: 238-9). In fact, there are studies in cognitive psychology which advocate for different treatment strategies according to a person's cultural background because what is effective in one culture will not necessarily be effective in another (Hofmann 2006: 243).

In the last two examples the omissions in the translations lead to pragmatic loss and therefore to a loss of cultural singularities. However, as the above examples demonstrate, even while translation is enriching a literature, its double-edged quality can be seen as displacing identities as well. The rich history of Chinese translation is well documented and illustrates losses and gains. Kenan (2002: 161) divides Chinese translation into five main periods: the translation of the Buddhist texts (148-1037), scientific and technological texts from the West (1368-1644), Western humanities and social sciences (1644-1911), texts from Russia (1950s-1970s), and the massive translation project of the present. In fact, as Yifeng explains "Many modern Chinese literary concepts derive from translations" (2008: 13). For example, until Lin Shu (1852-1924) started using numbers at the beginning of chapters in his translations, Chinese chapter headings were couplets that revealed the ensuing section. This seemingly small operational change is significant insofar as the translation procedure has given way to a distinct geographical location of the text. In this the East has become the West. Kenan (2002: 177) writes about the impossibility of confluence of intention and strategy by early 20th century Chinese translators. One of these translators is Yan Fu who has been criticized for translating according to the linguistic and literary norms of the time instead of translating into the vernacular. Kenan observes that had Yan Fu not done so, the changes he wished to introduce through the translation of Western literature would have been impossible because people would not have read him. On the other hand, the translation of stream of consciousness, a form initially banned for its individualism and its challenging the centrality of realism, can be said to have helped usher in a modernized and more individualistic China (Yifeng 2008: 25).

Innovative translation, such as the translation of stream of consciousness in Chinese literature or John Jones' translation which shifts the emphasis of Aristotle's *Poetics* from the hero (the emphasis of former translations) to the action (and our understanding of the philosopher's concept of tragedy) (Venuti 1998: 69) has real consequences for target languages, literatures and cultures.

Achy Obejas' translation of Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is one of these. The translation replicates the source text as far as the linguistic features allow it to. The author's style is a hybrid one: English and Spanish alongside each other creating a semi-historical, informal narrative punctuated with footnotes. The translator not only translates these but adds others to explain silences, cultural nuances, and linguistic differences. Her footnotes and translator's notes create the illusion of translating the untranslatable. It is a hip and rapid discourse: "Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about–he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock" (11). The translation reads: "Nuestro héroe no era uno de esos dominicanos de quienes todo el mundo anda hablando, no era ningún jonronero ni bachatero fly[8], ni un playboy con un millón de conquistas" (11). In accordance with Gupta's statement that an innovative translation should not "be allowed to fit easily into an old slot in the target literature" (Gupta 1998: 190), Achy Obejas includes the following footnote to the English 'fly': "8. [pronunciado: *fla-i*: Chévere, volao, bárbaro, macanudo, estupendo]." The strategies of Obejas, a well-known Cuban American writer, embodies the transcultural identity she shares with Diaz as a U.S. Latino writer. It is as if Obejas were following Spivak's instructions of attending "to the author's stylistic experiments" (2000: 400).

Conversely, there is an invisible but strong pressure translators feel "to rearrange, straighten out, and fill in to 'make sense' for his or her readers" (Mack 2002: 1). Translation studies abound in references to this. Spivak (2000: 400) reminds us of the specificity of language and the author's personal style and illustrates her point by citing Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle [versus gently] into that good night," and Venuti (2005: 181) writes of Weaver's use of "cream cheese" for "ricotta" in Italo Calvino's English translation of *Cosmicomics* to demonstrate how a culturally specific term has the power of dislocating a text. The elimination of the reference to *madrileños* (inhabitants of Madrid) in the beginning pages of the English version of Arturo Pérez Reverte's *El maestro de esgrima* (*The Fencing Master*) could be understood to be a translation strategy looking to distance the story (and the reader) from the immediate territorial identity of Madrid and even Spain. While this omission could be seen as a desire to expand the universality of the text, it speaks of assumptions of the target reader and calculated strategies of the translator or

publisher: as a wider readership identifies with the text there is the risk of displacing identities and situating them in alternate territories.

5. CONCLUSION

The notion of identity is central to any translation project regardless of the motivation behind its translation. Through translation new territories of identity are dis/placed. In the process, national literatures are created, languages become extinct and power imbalances, linguistic and otherwise, come about. An increasing attention to identity transcends linguistic and textual singularities to focus on placing the issue at the core of any and all translation projects.

6. REFERENCES

BACCHILEGA, C. y N. ARISTA. (2007): "The *Arabian Nights* in the *Kuokoa*, a Nineteenth-Century Hawaiian Newspaper: Reflections on the Politics of Translation" en Marzolph, U. (ed.): *The Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective.* Detroit, MI, Wayne State University, 157-182.

BETHELL, C. et al. (2003): "Measuring and Interpreting Health Care Quality Across Culturally-Diverse Populations: A Focus on Consumer-Reported Indicators of Health Care Quality." FACCT- Foundation for Accountability. http://www.markle.org/resources/facct/doclibFiles/documentFile_592.pdf

BHABHA, H. (1997 [1994]): *The Location of Culture.* Londres/Nueva York, Routledge.

DIAZ, J. (2007): *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.* New York, Riverhead Books. Trans. Obejas, A. (2008): *La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao.* Nueva York, Vintage Español.

FENTON, S. y P. MOON (2002): "The Translation of the Treaty of Waitangi: A Case of Disempowerment" en Tymoczko, M. and E. Gentzler (eds.): *Translation and Power.* Amherst/Boston, University of Massachusetts, 25-44.

GUPTA, P. (1998): "Post- or Neo-Colonial Translation? Linguistic Inequality and Translator's Resistance". *Translation & Literature,* 7.2, 170-193.

HATIM, B. e I. MASON. (2000): "Politeness in Screen Translating" en Venuti, L. (ed.): *The Translation Studies Reader.* Londres/Nueva York, Routledge, 430-445.

HICKEY, L. (2000): "Politeness in Translation between English and Spanish." *Target,* 12:2, 229-240.

HOFMANN, S. (2006): "The Importance of Culture in Cognitive and Behavioral Practice." *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice,* 13:4, 243-245.

KENAN, L. (2002): "Translation as a Catalyst for Social Change in China" en Tymoczko, M. y E. Gentzler (eds.): *Translation and Power.* Amherst/Boston, University of Massachusetts, 160-183.

MACK, M. (2002): "A note on translation" en *The Norton Anthology of World Literature. The Twentieth Century.* Nueva York/Londres, W. W. Norton & Company, A1-A12.

MEIFANG, Z. y V. LEI. (2004): "The Post-Colonial Translation Movement in Macao." (Abstract). IATIS. http://www.iatis.org

PÉREZ REVERTE, A. (1988): *El maestro de esgrima.* Madrid: Santillana. Trans. Jull Costa, M. (1998): *The Fencing Master.* Nueva York, Harcourt Books.

SILVA, N. (2004): *Aloha Betrayed.* Durham, N.C., Duke University.

SPIVAK, G. (2000): "The Politics of Translation" in Venuti, L. (ed.): *The Translation Studies Reader.* London/New York, Routledge, 397-416.

VENUTI, L. (2005): "Local Contingencies: Translation and National Identities" en Bermann, S. y M. Wood (eds.): *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation.* Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 177-202.

— (1998): *The Scandals of Translation. Towards an Ethics of Difference.* Londres/Nueva York, Routledge.

YIFENG, S. (2008): "Opening the Cultural Mind: Translation and the Modern Chinese Literary Canon". *Modern Language Quarterly,* 69:1, 13-27.