

Identity and the Cultural Effect of Translation

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Abstract:

Translation is a vital process that enhances cross-cultural communication. However uncontextualized translation can have a devastating effect on collective cultural identity. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the latent effects of translation on cultural identity, and how individuals and communities negotiate with the translated text and perceive its impact on their sense of identity. Through a critical analysis of select instances, we demonstrate how translation can perpetuate and/or disrupt cultural identity and its norms through deploying imported underlying cultural conceptualizations. It has been found that translation can lead to a sense of linguistic loss and cultural erosion, as translators/interpreters unconsciously ignore an integral part of the translation process-namely, the collective cultural sense of their produced meaning-which enters into the shaping of our sense of identity and belonging.

keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication, Cultural Relativism, Identity, Language hegemony.

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الهوية والأثر الثقافي للترجمة

الملخص:

الترجمة عملية حيوية تعزز التواصل بين الثقافات. ومع ذلك، يمكن أن يكون للترجمة غير النصية تأثير مدمر على الهوية الثقافية الجماعية. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تسليط الضوء على الآثار الكامنة للترجمة على الهوية الثقافية، وكيفية تفاعل الأفراد والمجتمعات مع النص المترجم وإدراكهم لتأثيره على إحساسهم بهويتهم. ومن خلال تحليل نقدي لنماذج مختارة، سنوضح كيف يمكن للترجمة أن تركز و/أو تعطل الهوية الثقافية ومعاييرها من خلال نشر المفاهيم الثقافية المستوردة الكامنة. وقد وجدنا أن الترجمة يمكن أن تؤدي إلى الشعور بالضيق اللغوي والتآكل الثقافي، حيث يتجاهل المترجمون والمترجمون الفوريون دون وعي جزء لا يتجزأ من عملية الترجمة - أي الحس الثقافي الجماعي للمعنى الذي أنتجوه - والذي يدخل في تشكيل إحساسنا بالهوية والانتماء. الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة؛ التواصل بين الثقافات؛ النسبية الثقافية؛ الهوية؛ الهيمنة اللغوية.

Introduction:

Our identities are our cultural tradition and history. Translating one's culture into another necessitates cultural knowledge and an awareness of the both cultural behaviors, beliefs, and values. Translation, in this sense, is not a linguistic apparatus insomuch as an interpretation of words' meaning, effect and signification. Paradoxically, identity formation is a process that is shaped by, and simultaneously, shapes the very context it continuously creates and is created by. Translation becomes a decisive tool in formulating and constructing cultural identities through modulating, preserving or eradicating cultural values, beliefs, or behavior. Translators become both authors and editors, in pedagogical terms, that inscribe meanings to linguistic symbols, and translation assumes an active role in the construction of identity.

Emily Apter pertinently talks about the centrality of intention as "a zone of critical engagement that connects the 'I' and the 'n'" (5). Similarly, in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), Lawrence Venuti discusses the role of the translator as a "writer" who inevitably transforms the source text to produce its meaning in the process (1). In *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha pays attention to the role of translation as a site of negotiation of identity transformation within the arena of identity politics (37). For Susan Bassnett, translation is a complex act of identity formation where both the translator and the text take shape through the act of translating. (85) Building upon the given theoretical and conceptual insights, this lecture attempts to highlight the role of translation in constructing collective identities and its effect on the reproduction of systems of episteme devastating to receptive cultures and nations. Through examining sample empirical data, the paper seeks to explore how translation plays a formulating role in entrenching epistemic constructions and

reconstructions of cultural values reframing cultural beliefs, or appropriating social behaviors of an individual as well as collective identity.

Objectives:

This paper aims to critically examine the impact of translation on cultural identity, particularly in the context of Arabic-English translation. From this general aim, two objectives can be set forth:

1. To identify the common domains of translations' cultural appropriation on identity formation.
2. To investigate the translational effect on identity's cultural belonging and identity's receptiveness.

Questions:

The question to be posed here is: to what extent does translation impact identity construction? This question can be subdivided into two sub-questions :

1. What are the common domains of translations' cultural appropriation on identity formation?
3. What is the consequentially translational effect on identity's cultural belonging and identity's receptiveness?

The Concept of Translation

My definition of the concept of translation goes beyond the formal traditional conceptualization. The definitions provided in this paper are based on my experience in practicing translation teaching translation, literary, critical and cultural courses as well as researching in the fields thereof.

First of all, translation is an artistic science that combines within it the skills of a craftsman in language handling and the knowledge of a committed scientist. Mastering language use is not a sign of a good translator unless he clothes his linguistic mastery with a tapestry of profound cultural awareness and contextual determinacy. Translation, therefore, is a living experience of continual revisiting of meaning production. Nothing is fixed, analogous or mechanical. The translator is in continuous negotiation with the world of his text, wherein social behavior guides and determines linguistic behavior. The translator emerges, then, as an active interlocutor in the communication (translation) process.

Secondly, translation is a site of interpretive ontology. The job of the translator is to render the phenomenologically intended not the ontologically recorded. The translator struggles to achieve communicability through conveying the discursively perceivable meaning, rather than the delivered

linguistic form. Hence, the ideas (meanings) are travelling through the translator from one destination code (SL/ST/SC) into a desired destination code (TL/TT/TC), subjected to reproduction process (by the translator) where they may smoothly pass untouched, be slightly absorbed or get wholly redrawn.

Thirdly, translation is a matter of discursal comprehension of power dynamics at play--an interplay between language, culture, and power. The production of meaning, as the central goal of translation, is a discursal process that results from the intersection of these elements altogether. Language acts as a symbolic carrier of meaning determined by its social context, and by a larger yet, subtler frame of power dynamics. In other words, the linguistic sign becomes the play where translators decode, encode (play with) the signifier in relation to its discursive signified.

Finally, translation is a consciously sensitive act with moral judgement. The translator himself is the receptor and the sender of the message, serving as a fair judge of his verdict. Failing to convey the sender's message accurately is like sentencing the appellant to the death penalty. This requires an established knowledge and informed awareness on the part of the translator of both the source and target languages and cultures, including an understanding of beliefs, values, norms, and social behaviors that may influence interpretation.

The Concept of Identity

Identity is a complex process of self-making and social negotiation. It is always in a state of flux reflecting individual evolution and social formation in response to its socio-cultural intake. What is identity if not the various distinct aspects and ramifications of an individual's activity? Thus identity is, in its metaphysical sense, is the sum of all that constitutes the individual's or a group's sense of self, or being. As a social being, man's identity is ultimately the results of his negotiation with his internal filiations and external affiliations. Consequently, an individual's identity is shaped by the enculturative reflections and acculturative influences of his world, including culture ethnicity, geography, belief, values, passions, personal experiences, and more. Any branching of identity is basically an extended classification of these aspectual features. So, we can talk about personal identity (the unique individuation features), cultural identity (particular shared cultural features such as customs, traditions, language, and history), social identity (membership to various social groups such as nationality, ethnicity, profession), etc.

The Concept of Culture

By culture we mean the beliefs, practices, arts, institutions, and social behaviors shared by a particular group of people. Cultural items can be tangible like art, food, and architecture, or intangible such as values, norms, customs, and traditions.

What is relevant here is to emphasize the relativity of culture. Cultural relativism is a significant notion that a translator should consider during his translational act. Unlike moralism, which is universal, culture, and accordingly, cultural meaning varies relatively from a group to another. Culture stands as a testimony of one's dignity, self, history, and ultimately, identity. Most of the grievances inflicted upon history of nations have been the mis-rendering or de-rendering (misrepresentation or appropriation) of their cultural intent and content.

Culture is preserved through acknowledging its values, beliefs, and practices that form the coherence whole of its collective identity. Nevertheless, culture is a dynamic entity that evolves over time due to inward aspirations, like personal inclinations and attitudinal readiness, and outward interpositions, such as globalization, colonization, and migration.

Within these conflicting forces, discursive patterns and intercultural communication, individuals draw their cultural production and construct their cultural selves and identities. Culture is produced through various forms of expression, including language, rituals, and arts, determining how individuals understand and relate to each other. Therefore, understanding culture is vital in the context of translation as it lays the groundwork for the interpretation of meaning and the appropriateness of linguistic choices.

Domains of Translational Cultural Appropriations

By translational cultural appropriations, it is meant the ways in which cultural element is integrated, transformed, or reframed through the act of translation so that it affects the cultural meaning, and consequently, is received or interpreted differently. These appropriations may occur across various domains:

1. Educational and academic Domain:

In academic and educational contexts, knowledge and pedagogical implications of one culture can be appropriated through translation so as to be taken up for educational or academic use in another. This results in infusing a potentially foreign cultural reception and interpretation. For example, "Teenager" is often translated as (مراهق), which has consequential educational implications on the psychological behavior of the learner and the pedagogical methods of the teacher. The term "teenager" مراهق in the Western culture implies an unchecked behavior, mood swings, and irresponsibility, necessitating special teaching care and methodology. The translation of

teenager as *مراهق* in this sense affects the behavior of Arab teens as well as the educational treatment and social expectations of this social group. Similarly, the translation of "Feminism" as *(النسوية)*, without specifying its cultural etymological context assumes that it is part of our Arabic Islamic culture, which it is not. This represents a form of an intellectual appropriation of translation in academia. It should be translated as *النظرية النسوية الغربية* so that the Arabic receiver of the term can assess its validity against his/her cultural values and norms. Translational agency should be addressed, and authorial transfer should be evaluated in light of cultural acceptability and relativist adaptability.

2. Social Domain:

An imprecise capturing of cultural nuances of both languages may affect social interactions and relationships of the individual and collective identity, and reshape its social practices. The translation of some food terms into Arabic carries with it the cultural source meaning. For example "hamburger" is translated *(همبرجر)*, which means "ham-meat"-a food item forbidden in Arab-Islamic culture. Instead, it can be translated as *شطيرة باللحم*, as domestication a technique. Another option is to simply use "شطيرة", adding explicatory phrase *بلحم البقر* alongside the Arabic word to highlight the cultural differences of the term. Translation in this sense becomes a marketing tool of culture, whereby the adaption of these translated terms leads to a cultural affinity with the source culture and, consequently, loss of Arab cultural norms and behavior. Noticeably, it has been observed that linguistic adaptation through translation occurs most frequently in food, clothing and socializing terms, such as *(cowboy) كايوبوي (sushi) سوشي (prestige) بريستيچ*, among others.

3. Political Domain:

Political domain is the field which involves the exercise of power dynamics, wherein translation becomes an ideological apparatus for disseminating this knowledge. Dominant powers subtly use language -knowledge is power- to market their ideologies.

In terms of identity politics, these political ideologies, stances and views are disseminated through translations, whereby the receiving identity adapts (consciously or unconsciously) such knowledge, and attitudes accordingly. For example, terms like "terrorist" *(إرهابي)*, "oppression" *(اضطهاد)*, and "Axis of Evil" *(محور الشر)* are politically charged terms produced by Western powers to convey political stances and attitudes. So, the direct translations of these loaded terms fail to capture the essence of their political associations. They convey the ideology stands, views of the dominant power (the ST), rather than those of the receiver (TT) and his perceptions.

4. Religious Domain:

Religious texts are highly sensitive. Rendering a religious text (not to speak of a sacred text) without adequate knowledge of its dogmatic entailment and religious connotations, or approaching it with ideological motivation, can lead to cultural disruptions in the receiver's identity. This may range from rebuffing, to skepticism, or even absorption of the source text knowledge and behavior. Translating doctrines can alter perceptions of faith, belief, and practice thereby influencing both individual and collective identities. The translation of Alcohol/drinks into (مشروبات روحية) is a sheer appropriation that affects Arab religious identity. This Arabic translation doesn't faithfully and accurately reflect the religious meaning of the words "a forbidden drink" in Islam. The translator appropriates the terms so as to adopt the source cultural value and behavior. The accurate translations are (خمر/شراب مسكر). Another example is the translation of "Merry Christmas" into عيد ميلاد سعيد, which entails a cultural appropriation of a Christian belief (a religious greeting Christians say commemorating the birth of Jesus).

5. Economic Domain:

The specificity of economic terms, concepts, products, and practices poses challenge to translators to accurately convey their contextual underpinnings. Translating terms such as "developing countries" and "free trade" requires cultural awareness and knowledge of their culturally economic entailment. Thus, Arabic translation "الدول النامية" does render the economically cultural use of the term "developing countries" within the power dynamics of the dominant powers that classified the world into socio-economical strata. However, translated as such doesn't do justice to the target audience of these countries as it is loaded with an extra ideological meaning, making people of these countries appear "less in status" than the claimed "developed" ones. Suggested translations could be "الاقتصادات النامية" instead.

The marketing of "free trade" commonly translated as "التجارة الحرة" is another economically cultural appropriation where a specifically economic capitalist system-subject to its rules and regulations-has been propagated through the translation into Arabic audience as تجارة حرة, while it is really different from his/her cultural perception of being "free". The rendering of "hard currency" العملة الصعبة in reference to US dollar, is another example of how translation shapes identity formulation within an economic context. We become more dependent on the dominant powers to teach us what to use/ follow even if it is not applicable to our cultural norms or intersects with our cultural values. The result is simply that translators grow in numbers whereas identity loses in authenticity.

Manifestations of Translational Cultural Appropriations

The effect of translation can be observed in various forms of appropriations:

1. Linguistic Adaptation and Cultural Internalization: Translation is a primary source for linguistic appropriation and adaptation. The incorporation of English terms and expressions into Arabic language has a significant impact on Arab cultural identity. This is evident, for example, in the adaption of food, clothing and socializing behavior affiliated to English culture, through the inoculation of linguistic terms such "barbecue", "cowboy" and "prestige" in translations.

2. Cultural Commodification and Cultural Marketing: Culture is marketed via language translation serves as the channel. Translation often leads to the commodification of cultural products, where elements of a culture become marketable globally, sometimes resulting in the loss of cultural authenticity. As explained earlier, critically and discursively imperfect translations help consciously or unconsciously to accommodate and celebrate foreign cultural values and behaviors.

3. Cultural Hybridity and Cultural Immersion: Many Arab intellectuals and writers who have migrated incorporate their hybrid experience in the multicultural communities into their writings and translations. Due to their position within the Western academia and culture, these Arab intellectuals take to task their duty to render Western knowledge and experience into Arabic thereby transferring their hybrid cultural meanings through hybrid expressions to Arab readers who begin to identify themselves with multiple cultural influences, such as the bilingual experience. Western concepts and theories such as "feminism", "humanism", "capitalism" "structuralism", "deconstruction", etc., rendered into النسوية، الحركة الإنسانية، الرأسمالية، البنيوية، التفكيكية، are representative examples of how translation plays a major role in cultural hybridity and exfiltrates cultural immersion.

4. Representation and Narrative Framing: translation can help construct identities through sheer transferring of SL/SC images or through misrepresentation of cultural norms. Literature and public discourse have been productive spaces for constructing identities, and translation induces an instilling effect by domesticating these constructs into local cultures while maintaining the original cultural connotations of the SL. This type of appropriation is common in mass media, political and literary translation where constructed terms are brought in to Arab culture through unchecked translations. It becomes common for media outlets and literary forums to talk of "terrorists", as إرهابيون, "Philadelphia Axis" to mean محور صلاح الدين and "cannibals" as آكلين لحوم البشر. Such translations help disseminate the epistemological constructs of the ST writer in the mind of the TT audience. The following table illustrates the working of these appropriation.

LINGUISTIC VARIATION (TRANSLATION ACT/INPUT)			THEMATIC DISTRIBUTION OF TRANSLATIONAL IMPACT (OUTPUT/CULTURAL EFFECT)		
ST (E)	TT (A)	Sugg. Tran.	Appropriation Domain	Themes	Sub-themes
TEENAGER	مراهق	فتى، يافع	educational, social	Internalization of Culture through Translation	Cultural immersion
FEEDBACK	تغذية راجعة	تعليق/ تعقيب	academic, educational, professional	Internalization of Culture through Translation	Cultural immersion
ALCOHOL/DRINKS	مشروبات روحية	خمر، مُسكرات	religious, social	Internalization of Culture through Translation	Emotional connection
TERRORIST	إرهابي	إرهابي (محدد الهوية)	political	Power dynamics and legitimization	Narrative Framing/ Power dynamics and legitimization
CANNIBAL	أكلة لحوم البشر	رجل الغابات	social, political	Representation	Narrative Framing/ Epistemic Framing
AMERICAN DREAM	الحلم الأمريكي	النظرة/ الزعة الأمريكية	social, political	Marketing of Culture through Translation	Cultural homogenization
FREE TRADE	تجارة حرة	تجارة حرة (بصيفتها الأمريكية)	economic, social	Representation	Narrative Framing
OPEN-DAY	يوم مفتوح	يوم مفتوح (للأنشطة والفقرات)	social, professional, educational	Internalization of Culture through Translation	Cultural immersion
CAPITALISM	الرأسمالية	الرأسمالية (مذهب اقتصاد الأثرياء)	religious, social, economical	Representation	Power dynamics and legitimization
CHRISTMAS	عيد الميلاد	كل عام وانتم بخير/ أتمنى لكم حياة سعيدة	religious, social	Internalization of Culture through Translation	Cultural immersion
FEMINISM	النسوية	الحركة/ المدرسة/ المذهب النسوية الغربية	academic, religious, social	Marketing of Culture through Translation	Cultural immersion
HUMANISM	الإنسانية	المذهب/ المدرسة/ الإنسانية الغربية	academic, religious, social	Marketing of Culture through Translation	Cultural commodification/ Cultural homogenization
IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION	تعبير الاصطلاحي	تعبير الاصطلاحي/ عبارة اصطلاحية/ عبارة مسكوكة	academic	Internalization of Culture through Translation	Cultural immersion
RAP MUSIC	موسيقى الراب	موسيقى الراب/ تحديد السياق التاريخي الثقافي الأمريكيين الأفارقة	social	Marketing of Culture through Translation	Cultural commodification/ Cultural homogenization
HAMBURGER	همبرغر	شطيرة باللحم (خاصة لحم البقر)	religious, social,	Marketing of Culture through Translation	Cultural commodification
FAST FOOD	وجبات سريعة	الوجبات الخفيفة/ مأكولات سفري/ وجبات جاهزة	Social	Marketing of Culture through Translation	Cultural commodification

Conclusion:

While it facilitates intercultural communication, translation plays a devastating role on identity formation through appropriating the cultural meaning of the ST. As such, translation is a paradoxically complex act of identity formation that is shaped by, and simultaneously, shapes the very text/context it discursively creates. Cultural meaning is the product of the negotiation between the translator and the text through the act of translating.

Translation becomes a decisive tool in formulating and constructing cultural identities through modulating, preserving or eradicating cultural values, beliefs, or behavior. It can lead to a sense of linguistic loss, cultural erosion, cultural appropriation on individual and collective Arab identity. Misinformed Arabic translation of English terms leads to epistemic constructions and reconstructions of Arab cultural values, reframing cultural beliefs, and appropriating social behaviors of Arab individual as well as collective identity. Most of the grievances inflicted upon history of nations have been the mis-rendering or de-rendering (misrepresentation or appropriation) of their cultural intent and content.

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