The Role of Translators as Cultural Mediators and its Implications in the Training of Prospective Maltese Translators

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Abstract: The last decades have seen a significant change in the perception of the role of translators. The increased complexity of communication networks brought about by globalization and the exponential increase in the use of the internet have resulted in a stronger awareness of cultural differences that may hinder effective communication. Since the cultural turn in Translation Studies of the 1990s, cultural mediation (as defined by Stephen Bochner in his *The Mediating Person: Bridges between Cultures*, 1981) has become the major focus of attention in the analysis of the relationship between source and target texts. Translation is nowadays considered much more than the practice of linguistic transposition. The translator is not just a linguist who knows more than one language, but a specialist in both the source and the target culture, a bi-cultural expert whose task it is to translate both the written and the non-written. On their part, translation-training courses often tend to overlook the cultural aspect of translation, taking the students' competence in both cultures as a given, in order to focus on translation strategies and linguistic correspondence. The paper aims to investigate the role of the translator as a mediator and the importance of cultural awareness, with specific reference to the training of prospective Maltese translators. It will discuss effective cultural competence and students' self-evaluation, attitudes towards highly culturally specific texts, research issues, and the translation strategies required to bridge the cultural gap between texts. It also suggests ways how to include cultural awareness in translation training programmes to ensure that future translators are not only aware of the importance of their role as cultural mediators but also well-equipped to take on

such a responsibility. The issues discussed and the examples provided are based on the author's experience as a translator trainer responsible for the Italian-Maltese practical translation course at the University of Malta.

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The last thirty years have seen a significant change in the perception of the importance of translation and the role of translators. Translation has come to be seen as a much more complex task than the transfer of words from one language to another. Following the cultural turn in Translation Studies in the 1990s, prompted by the work of scholars such as Lefevere and Bassnett,[1] the focus of the discipline has moved from linguistic transposition to cultural transference. Until then, translation was categorized as a sub-discipline of Applied Linguistics,[2] whereas literary translations were considered a marginal issue in the realm of Comparative Literature. The challenges posed by the cultural characteristics of texts became a crucial element in translation practice and a new awareness emerged of the need to understand the deeper issues in translation by engaging with other disciplines such as Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communication. Moreover, the translator began to be considered not only as a bilingual linguist but also as a cultural mediator, according to Bochmer's definition of a mediating person as 'an individual who serves as a link between two or more cultures and social systems'.[3] Such a shift in focus was a watershed in the development of Translation Studies as a discipline. However, the changing role of the translator has still not yet been fully accepted both within and outside the profession. Work providers and translators alike still tend to regard translation as a quasi-mechanical task of linguistic transfer. This paper seeks to discuss how translation students can be made aware of the importance of their role as cultural mediators and appreciate the responsibilities their profession entails.

The dramatic technological progress in long-distance communication that has taken place since the invention of the personal computer and

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1   S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures. Essays on Literary Translation* (Clevedon–Philadelphia, 1998).
2   J.C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (Oxford, 1965).
3   S. Bochmer, (ed.) *The Mediating Person. Bridges Between Cultures* (Boston, 1981), 3.

the internet has brought different cultures into contact much more than ever before in history. On a socio-economic level, it facilitated globalization by enabling investors and producers to communicate rapidly and directly with counterparts and clients in different parts of the world, thus facilitating access to foreign markets. Eventually, multinational enterprises became aware that, in order to be successful at a global level, their products had to be tailored to the specific needs of different markets and presented to end users according to the latter's particular worldview, hence the need for localization. Such changes resulted not only in a surge in translation and the consequent expansion of the industry, but also in the need to cater for cultural differences in order to achieve the required results in different socio-cultural contexts. Stakeholders have increasingly become aware that translation is not just about words but involves translating worldviews in order to convey both message and effect. It is not just required for what is said (or written), but also for what is unsaid. This is why the view that translators can be replaced by artificial intelligence is proving to be a misconception, despite the lingering popular opinion to the contrary and the progress of translation technology. Research on the evolution of the translation industry shows that job opportunities in languages nowadays require cultural mediation in the form of localization for products and services.[4] However, translators themselves are seldom aware of the situation, and continue to perceive their profession in a traditional way. As Katan rightly observed, 'they need to move away from being seen as photocopiers and working as human dictionaries to be perceived as visible agents in creating understanding between people'.[5]

In my experience as a translator trainer at the University of Malta, the vast majority of translation students perceive translation merely as a linguistic task and require gradual guidance to achieve awareness of the cultural competence involved in the profession. It takes time for them to understand that they have to focus on the message relayed to the end user rather than on the text itself. This may be explained by their inexperience which makes them feel safer to concentrate on the lexical level of the

4   D. Gouadec, *Translation as a Profession* (Amsterdam–Philadelphia, 2010), 39.
5   D. Katan, *Translating Cultures. An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators* (London–New York, 2004), 3.

text. Moreover, students who enrol in the post-graduate diploma course in Translation Studies have varying levels of language competence in their two source languages (English and a foreign language of choice). The majority of those who choose Italian are usually graduates from the BA programme in Italian. However, some BA graduates in Maltese who also possess an Advanced or Intermediate level qualification in Italian also choose this option. A third group consists of students who only studied Maltese and English as languages at post-secondary level and find themselves compelled to choose Italian since it is the only other language to which they ever had some kind of exposure. In this case, the students would have obtained a SEC (Ordinary) level qualification in Italian, or even have no formal qualification in the language at all.

Groups with such varying levels of language competence present a considerable challenge to the translator trainer. It must be noted, however, that formal qualifications in the language do not provide an accurate reflection of the students' knowledge of a particular culture. There are other more decisive factors, such as personal experience through family relations or independent travel, exposure to a foreign country's mass media, and general interest in languages and current affairs. Students who have spent time in a foreign country, interacting with the locals and living their way of life, are much more likely to develop an interest in the culture than those who have never visited the country. They also tend to have a better idiomatic competence in the foreign language and are generally more eager to learn about the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the country. More importantly, they tend to develop a more open attitude towards other cultures, which puts them in a better position to appreciate cultural diversity and to accept cultural mediation as an integral part of their future role as translators.

On the other hand, students who have never had any direct interaction with the foreign culture corresponding to their language of choice, apart from basic notions learnt at school, tend to be less keen in deepening their cultural competence. In my experience, they are usually surprised when challenged by cultural differences between the source and target culture and most become painfully aware of their limitations in identifying cultural characteristics reflected in language that are so important in translation. In extreme cases, some students are reluctant

to leave their comfort zone and prefer to find refuge in superficial impressions and prejudice. In these cases, they try to avoid facing the challenge and try to get away with literal translation.

Such attitudes are reflected in the common translation strategies adopted by students to compensate for cultural mismatch. The following are a few examples of sentences my students had to translate and which gave rise to discussions on cultural awareness and how to tackle culture-specific occurrences in the source text:

1. *Va a Milano e Palermo* la **maglia nera** *della sicurezza stradale.*
2. *È* **fumata bianca** *tra avvocati e Procura della Repubblica dopo un vertice ai massimi livelli […].*
3. *Disastro referendum/ Una* **Caporetto** *sindacale senza appello.*
4. *Ladro scambia i carabinieri per corteggiatori della moglie che* **faceva il** '**palo**'.
5. *Beppe Grillo sembra un* **sessantottino**.

The decisions taken by the students to solve the above translation problems broadly correspond to the levels of competence and the attitudes described above. Admittedly, the expressions presented varying degrees of difficulty. However, it was observed that students who had a greater exposure to Italian, although not necessarily the highest formal qualifications, performed better than their peers. In general, they found '*maglia nera*' and '*fumata bianca*' the easiest to translate, whereas '*Caporetto*' and '*sessantottino*' were found most difficult. These results are hardly surprising, since the first two expressions are often used in TV news programmes. Exposure to Italian current affairs and some basic knowledge of Italian history allow translators to identify more easily the presence of metaphors and allusions in texts that contain figurative language.

A number of students who translated at least some of the above expressions correctly did not know their meaning beforehand. Their cultural awareness was enough for them to suspect that they had to dig deeper to find the meaning of the sentence, starting from the overall context and then carrying out research to find the best solution. When asked to describe the translation process they undertook, these students mentioned that, once they identified the presence of an expression, they re-read the paragraph and narrowed down the expression's possible

meanings accordingly. They then googled the expression on the internet and identified its meaning and its corresponding nuances. Such students consider similar challenges as an opportunity to enrich their cultural competence and refine their translation skills. They find their work rewarding and appreciate their role as cultural mediators.

On the other hand, the students with a lower level of exposure, some of whom in possession of higher academic qualifications in Italian, tended to avoid facing the challenges posed by instances of cultural specificity. Some chose meaningless literal translations such as '*flokk l-iswed*' for '*maglia nera*', '*daħna bajda*' for '*fumata bianca*', and '*arblu*' for '*palo*'. They also tended to leave '*Caporetto*' untranslated. Such an attitude does not only show inexperience and a lack of appreciation of what translation effectively entails, of the ethical responsibility of the translator, and of adequate cultural competence; it also shows a lack of interest in cultures other than one's own, where the specific characteristics of a foreign culture that challenge one's own self-perception from the perspective of the target culture are effectively ignored. Students who adopt this attitude become aware of their cultural limitations, but react to them in different ways. Some strive to make up for their shortcomings and try to find means to deepen their knowledge of the target culture, but others simply limit themselves to take note of the 'correct' translation and move on. Needless to say, the latter's prospects of becoming successful general translators and cultural mediators tend to be very limited, although they could perform adequately when translating specialized non-figurative texts such as EU-related documents that are repetitive and culturally non-specific.

In the scenario described above, it was deemed necessary to integrate Italian to Maltese translation training with deepening awareness both of the importance of the source culture and of the translator's role as a cultural mediator. Unfortunately, the study unit devoted to the second target language is limited to 4 ECTS, corresponding to just 28 hours of teaching time. The two-semester-long diploma course does not allow further time for honing students' cultural awareness in the second target language. Such a process takes time, because a shift in focus that requires reflection and readiness to open oneself to a different worldview is not easy to achieve.

In 2015, the last time I taught the course before going on sabbatical leave, I tried an experiment to gauge my students' level of cultural competence and see their reaction after self-evaluating their cultural awareness. I devoted the first lecture of the study unit to an overview of Italian history from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, with particular reference to key moments that have remained present in Italian cultural discourse until today. In particular, I focused on the following:

1. Liberal Italy and the colonization of Libya, both countries being close neighbours of Malta but whose historical relationship is often ignored by the Maltese.
2. The Fascist period ('*il ventennio*').
3. The economic post-war boom.
4. Party politics and the 1968 protests.
5. Terrorism and the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s.
6. Berlusconism and contemporary Italy.

Inevitably, it was only possible to provide a cursory glance on these highly complicated periods in the history of Italy and much was left out owing to time constraints. Thanks to a selection of brief videos found on YouTube, I was also able to provide visual information with which the students could engage. Time restrictions compelled me to focus on certain aspects of these historical eras; for every period I included a set of expressions used in contemporary Italian alluding to historical figures, events, rhetoric, and expressions still in common use (e.g. the famous Fascist-era expression '*adunata oceanica*' to describe a huge crowd, today generally used with a negative connotation). The pace of the lecture was inevitably very fast, but my objective was not to provide factual information. It was rather an attempt to make the students aware of what they knew, of what they thought they knew, and of what they did not know about Italy and Italian popular culture.

The feedback obtained from the students was very positive. A student with a keen interest in political affairs who also worked as a part-time journalist remarked that he had realized how little he knew about Italy's history and the impact of past events on the country's current socio-cultural situation. Other students later told me they carried out further research on the internet about particular topics I had mentioned only

fleetingly. For the following lectures, I chose texts that contained an increasing amount of culture-specific elements, both in language and in content, in order to reinforce the cultural awareness of the students who accepted the challenge and undertook a journey of cultural discovery that at the end of the study unit gave them a very different picture of the Italy they had thought they knew quite well.

The second step of cultural awareness related to translation is mediation. Once a translator becomes aware of the cultural differences between source and target culture, s/he will have to find ways how to bridge the cultural gap both conceptually and linguistically. How is one to render a concept or an expression that is absent from the target culture and its language? There is no straightforward solution to this problem but various strategies have been identified by scholars in recent decades.[6] Students are taught how to use these strategies, but lack of experience often leads them to seek linguistic solutions that do not take into account the target readership. Over-translation, simplification, complication, and ambiguity are pitfalls of which students must be made aware in order for them to achieve successful cultural mediation.

This is especially the case when translating newspaper articles from Italian to Maltese, since the educational level of newspaper readers differs between both countries. In Italy, 80% of habitual readers are in possession of a university degree.[7] On the other hand, Maltese-language newspapers, which are mostly mouthpieces of political parties or other institutions, serve a readership that generally has a lower level of education in a country that has one of the lowest percentages of adults in tertiary education and also the highest percentage of school-leavers in the EU.[8] Translation students have to be aware that processes of simplification or explicitation may be necessary when translating for a Maltese general readership and form part of the cultural mediation required of translators.

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6   See M. Ordudari, 'Translation procedures, strategies and methods', *Translation Journal*, 11 (2007) http://translationjournal.net/journal/41culture.htm (accessed 27 June 2017).

7   Istat, *La lettura in Italia. Anno 2015* (Rome 2016), 3 in https://www.istat.it/it/files/2016/01/Lettura-libri_2015.pdf (accessed 27 June 2017).

8   'Malta with the lowest people in tertiary education and the highest percentage of school leavers', *The Malta Business Weekly*, 20 April 2017 in http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-04-27/education/Malta-with-the-lowest-people-in-tertiary-education-and-the-highest-percentage-of-school-leavers-6736173560 (accessed 27 June 2017).

In an attempt to strengthen local translation students' cultural awareness, as from the academic year 2018–19, the Department of Translation, Terminology, and Interpreting Studies of the University of Malta shall be introducing a new compulsory study unit entitled 'Translation and Culture' which shall deal with the issue of translators as cultural mediators from a non language-specific perspective. It will aim to guide the students to make the transition from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective. They will be led to appreciate that no culture is normal when compared to others and that diversity is not a danger to be avoided but a challenge to be taken up. In translation terms, our students shall be required to pursue a change of attitude, from appropriation to interaction between cultures, in order to become better professionals, appreciate their responsibility as cultural mediators, and adapt themselves better to the multi-ethnic society they live in, both on a professional and on a personal level. In doing so, as translator trainers we shall be fulfilling our duty to prepare future professionals for the rapidly changing language industry, as well as to form citizens who see other cultures as a richness rather than a threat.

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