Translation as Buffering

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In very tense and conflicting situations, translators/interpreters/mediators[1] are sometimes led to smooth the terms or the tone or any other aspect of a message, and this for several reasons. The verb "to buffer" relates to an act of "cushioning" and "lessening the effect of",[2] but can also refer to a neutralizing chemical treatment[3]. There is also *Bufferin,* the buffered aspirin, coated with a substance capable of neutralizing acid, so as to avoid the undesirable side-effects of the drug (such as ulcers and stomach bleeding).

When translators "percolate" a message before rendering it in the other language, they function as a sort of buffer. Interpreting is a field where this happens quite often, because in interpreting situations there may be many elements that contribute to create a situation of imminent clash. Nonetheless authors of written translations also find themselves for some reason compelled to smooth the harshness of some words, use less vibrant colors to create a "typical picture" of a certain culture, and even neutralize exalted attitudes of one or more parties.

In such situations, to translate adequately means much more than translating accurately or being faithful to an original. In very general terms, an adequate translation would be one that did not nurture feelings of intolerance that could lead to some violent outcome. Also at stake is the professional status of translators, who besides trying not to aggravate a tense situation, are being judged for their professional competence, detachment, neutrality and honesty.

Instead of just trying to imagine difficult situations, it will be useful here to investigate an example of an institutionalized set of norms which, having considered some of these potentially conflicting circumstances, have established ways to cope with them. An example is the *National Standards of Practice for Interpreters in Health Care*, published by the American National Council on Interpreting in Health Care. The text presents itself as providing "the necessary guideposts for improving the training of health care interpreters, helping to raise the quality and consistency of interpreting in health care" (p.2).

The standards are 32 in number, organized under nine headings. Under each heading there is an established goal that that will supposedly be achieved by means of the practice or attitude indicated. There are also examples to make the understanding easier. The nine headings are no sur-

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1- Despite the specific differences among them, these three terms will be used interchangeably in this text.

2- According to the Merrian Webster Unabridged Dictionary, a buffer is "any of various devices, apparatus, or pieces of material designed primarily to reduce shock due to contact".

3- Still according to the Merrian Webster Unabridged Dictionary, the term "buffer" can also mean "a substance or mixture of substances (as acid salts of weak acids or amphoteric substances) that in solution is capable of neutralizing within limits both acids and bases and thus acts to maintain the original hydrogen-ion concentration of the solution, various of such substances playing fundamental roles in natural processes (as bicarbonates and proteins in biological fluids or clay and organic matter in soils).

prise to anyone: Accuracy, Confidentiality, Impartiality, Respect, Cultural Awareness, Role Boundaries, Professionalism, Professional Development, and Advocacy. Having a quick look at them, one sees they are concerned with the clients (Accuracy, Confidentiality, Impartiality, Respect, Cultural Awareness), but also with the interpreters and their integrity (Role Boundaries) and the status of the profession in general (Professionalism, Professional Development). The last heading brings to the fore the right to interfere if one of the parties is in danger or is being abused. So, at a first glance, we see that even in this code of ethics impartiality and detachment are circumscribed. Standards 31 and 32, under "Advocacy", establish that:

31. The interpreter may speak out to protect an individual from serious harm.

32. The interpreter may advocate on behalf of a party or group to correct mistreatment or abuse.

"Serious harm" is exemplified by an overlooked "life-threatening allergy", and "mistreatment and abuse" are vaguely qualified as "patterns of disrespect". In these two cases, the interpreter may intervene on the behalf of the patients (p. 10). Obviously this implies not being impartial and transparent anymore, not even in the terms of the code of conduct. Which means that, even in an ethical guide that is based on ideal conditions, there is a breach for intervention in face of an "unfair treatment". This paper centers exactly on cases that are extreme, in which the intervention of the translator, mediator or interpreter is welcome and even expected in order to avoid a greater harm. The complexity of this conflicting kind of interaction will be analyzed below in the course of some case studies.

The Media, the Muslims and the World

Mona Baker has published a study about an interview given by Saddam Hussein in 1990 to Trevor McDonald for the British television channel ITN. According to Baker (1997:112), the interview was recorded live in Baghdad and was broadcast to 3.5 million viewers in Britain and many more millions of people around the world who watched the retransmitted interview or clips of it.

The participants were Trevor McDonald (a well known British journalist and television presenter), Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, the main interpreter and a second interpreter, who was present all the time but made few interventions. The interviewer addressed the questions in English, and these did not have to be translated into Arabic, since Hussein "understands English without any problem" (p. 112). As Hussein refused to answer McDonald's questions in English, an interpreter was in charge. There was also a second interpreter, probably to help the main interpreter

or to translate McDonald's questions into Arabic, but then it was decided that it would not be necessary.

Iraq's occupation of Kuwait some months earlier had caused an instantaneous reaction all around the world. The opposing countries were on the brink of waging war — authorized by the UN — against Iraq in case Hussein refused to withdraw from Kuwait. For these reasons, the encounter was especially tense, and although Hussein and McDonald were polite to each other, the hostility between them was obvious. In such a predicament, being watched by both parties and all the audience, the interpreter opted for a "literal" strategy, which consisted of focusing mainly on the meaning of words and its several aspects. In an attempt to cover all the semantic nuances of certain words, the interpreter used several synonyms, as can be seen in passages like the following:

Let us… we must rather… we must choose or take or adopt a single criterion or a single standard. (p. 116)

A suspicious attitude on both parties also contributed to this interpreting strategy. Before the interview started, worried about working into a foreign language, the interpreter approached Trevor McDonald and asked if he was going to use any "complicated" term. McDonald said he would use the word *disembowel*, in the context of atrocities that, according to some reports, were happening or had happened in Kuwait. Alarmed, the interpreter asked if the interviewer was really going to mention such things to the President. McDonald, who was already irritated with a series of security procedures he had been submitted to before the interview, seeing at that point the interpreter almost as an ally of Hussein, answered in these terms:

Yes I will, and if I suspect for any reason that you are not conveying what I'm saying accurately, I will draw the relevant sign across my own stomach to make the President understand. (p. 122)

Saddam Hussein, in his turn, did not make things any easier for the interpreter. Because he was also an Iraqi, the interpreter probably wanted to give Hussein the impression that he was on his side (p. 118), but even so Hussein at points questioned the ability of the interpreter to do his job (p. 117) and corrected him in his rendering of the message into English (p. 121). Fearing the possibility of giving a wrong or partial interpretation of the message, sometimes the interpreter stepped out of his role and interrupted Hussein to explain himself to McDonald (p.118), or to ask Hussein if he did understand a certain word (p.123). In Baker's terms, his was a faithful, honest and literal translation (p. 123).

More than the message itself, this strategy ended up buffering the way it was communicated. Perhaps the two most outstanding alterations of Hussein's speech were the very way he spoke and a certain undermining

of his sarcasm. As Baker points out, the interpreter's worry about not relaying the exact meaning of content words forced him on occasion to use several synonyms and words with overlapping meaning to render just one word of the Arabic message — these words connected by *or* — and the effect was one of — a hesitant — speech. As Baker notes, "it is worth pointing out that this kind of repetition and hesitation — is not a feature of Saddam's speech. Saddam is a very lucid speaker" (p. 117).

Right at the beginning of the interview, McDonald asks Saddam if he has taken seriously Margaret Thatcher's threat of making him pay compensation for the damage caused in Kuwait. As Baker puts it:

> The interpreter translates McDonald's words literally, almost word-for-word, as follows:

> In any case, when Mrs. Thatcher says anything like this seriously then of course it has to be taken seriously.

Baker proceeds:

> The phrase "in any case" has quite a different force in Arabic, in this context. It has the force of something like the ironic *Oh well* in English, i. e. "Oh well, if Mrs. Thatcher says anything like this seriously then we'll have to take her seriously". Saddam is clearly being sarcastic in this instance, and the sarcasm does not come across in English because of the literal rendering of the conjunction and because of the serious tone adopted by the interpreter, who is clearly tense (p.115-16).

In her opinion,

> Some British viewers who have no access to Arabic and who watched this interview thought that Saddam was incoherent and paranoid. Anyone who has listened to Saddam speak in Arabic, on this or other occasions, will know that he is far from being incoherent and that, irrespective of what he thinks of his policies, he is a very persuasive speaker and a skilled orator. (p.124)

Baker is clearly worried about the creation or reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. She concludes her article stating that this kind of interaction, which she calls "political interpreting", deserves further research, so that interpreter performance in these settings can be improved.

The same concern is expressed by Susan Bassnett when she calls attention to the necessity of more research on a genre that she calls "news

translation", which is specific and in some cases very sensitive. Bassnett observes that many characteristics of this kind of interaction justify a broader and deeper study, taking into consideration the specificity of translation of news stories (many journalists even "eschew the term translator", preferring to be considered as journalists working across languages (2005:124)), and the context in which it happens. According to her, hardly ever a translation in the traditional sense will occur, and other strategies will take place, such as "summary, paraphrase, addition and subtraction, reshaping in accordance with target culture conventions, rewriting in a particular house style" (p. 125).

The fact that different countries have different styles of reporting news is also an important aspect of this genre. Although British readers expect reports to be delivered in direct speech, other European readers would expect indirect speech instead. The use of hyperboles is common in Italian reporting, which contrasts with English irony and understatement. In view of all these specificities, it becomes clear that news stories demand a lot of textual reshaping, "to ensure that a text is suited to the target audience" (p. 124).

The general conclusion drawn by Bassnett in this part of the discussion is that the translation of news stories is characterized by acculturation strategies. In her opinion, news reporting as a genre "appears to sit somewhere between translation [...] and interpreting", with news reporters operating in a manner similar to the way interpreters work, with more freedom to reshape the message.

All this calls for a reconsideration of methodological issues on the part of Translation Studies researchers. Although they are not talking precisely of the same genre, there are relevant converging aspects in Baker's and Bassnett's examples. Both state that the kind of genre they are treating deserves more attention and a distinguished approach. But there is also another common aspect in their texts: the main character. *Reenter* Saddam Hussein.

Bassnett first analyzes several versions of the "same" text: the report of a brief appearance by Hussein before a court in Baghdad in 2004. The confidential character of the hearing made it impossible for journalists to watch it personally, but an English transcript was made available to the media. According to the author, it is difficult to decide which is the "original" text, since all the accounts of the hearing given to several press agencies and newspapers differ considerably. In some cases the text would give a verdict as to who "won" or "took control" of the situation. In others, the words of both parties came intermingled with descriptive phrases like "Saddam's eyes flashed in anger" (p. 126).

Bassnett is of the opinion that Western readers have no idea of how the exchange sounded in Arabic and whether Hussein really "dominated the proceedings", as one of the stories claims. She emphasizes the "gulf"

dividing Anglo-Saxon political rhetoric from "much of the rest of the world, the Middle East in particular" (p. 126-27). She sticks to a position according to which some strategy of acculturation has to take place when news stories travel around the world. To reinforce this idea she presents another case study, again featuring Saddam Hussein, but now the text is the transcription of a speech delivered on Iraqi television and published in translation in *The Guardian* on January 6, 2003. The translator rendered the text following a literalist strategy, which created an awkward message in English, with phrases that are "sometimes meaningless […] hyperbolic, overblown and often ridiculous" (p. 127).

In Bassnett's view the literal translation of the Arabic speech may offer a glimpse of a "powerful rhetorical convention that draws upon a rich figurative language and is closely linked to religious discourse", but "none of that comes across in English". Bassnett argues that "acculturation is essential in news reporting" and, in contexts like the one described by her, "foreignisation is detrimental to understanding". Although authors like Venuti claim that foreignization is the most ethical strategy in translation, since it would be a way of resisting ethnocentrism, the context of news reporting should be oriented by an acculturation strategy according to Bassnett.

Bassnett concludes this part of her article with the argument that foreignizing strategies are more adequate for literary translation, and that the context of global news is tense and should be approached with special care:

> What seems to have happened […] is that the translation strategy employed derives from literary methods, in contrast to the news reporting strategy that privileges acculturation as we see in the court transcript. The result of these two methods is the creation of an uneasy, unbalanced view of people deemed to be enemies of the West, whose identities are constructed through the peculiar language in which their ideas are conveyed. Foreignising in such cases is not resistance, it is a form of textual violence that could be avoided through acculturation (id.: 129).

Dealing with what is typical and popular

Translation inevitably creates a representation of the cultural other for a receiving culture. There are some cases in which the representation of what is "typical" creates some problems. In general the described culture has an uneasy feeling of being misrepresented and pictured in a reductive or caricatural fashion. Similar difficulties may emerge when a popular tradition is represented. The meaning of popular manifestations is even more fluid and slippery than the meaning of texts due to a constant recreation of practices, discourses, ritualistic gestures and ceremonies.

In "A Translator's Dilemma", Philip Sutton reports a similar situation. In 1994 he was commissioned to translate a text for *Ronda Iberia*, Iberia Airlines's in-flight bilingual magazine, which is published in Spanish and English. The text was about a popular festival typical of Fresnedillas de la Oliva, a small Spanish village near Madrid. According to the Spanish text, which he was translating into English, one group of protagonists in the party are "los judios o motilones", the terms being used almost as synonyms. As a translator, Sutton realized the complexity of his task. The representation of "Jews" in a grotesque situation could stir the indignation of this people. In effect it did, as will be seen below. But let's follow the translator's reasoning and strategy.

With respect to the problem created by the touchy term *judios* in this context, Sutton could find no alternative except to translate the word and write it within inverted commas, "Jews", in an attempt to signal that it was a special use of the term. But the other word, *motilones*, was also problematic. According to Sutton, the term has a wide range of meanings in Spanish, but the basic meaning is that of someone with a shorn head. Sutton soon concluded that "any textual juxtaposition of Jews and cropped heads instantly conjures up the holocaust" (1997: 68). To avoid this, the translator ended up choosing the term *friar*, even though in logical terms it contradicts *Jews*, and in the text the two words are used interchangeably.

The buffering strategy used by Sutton avoided, at the expense of logic, a term that could possibly lead to an infamous association, and he produced, in his own words, a "rather bizarre oxymoron" (p. 69). In fact one important characteristic of this kind of buffering strategy is that it is not always successful. In Sutton's case, the oxymoronical buffer did not prevent the text as a whole from offending two members of the Simon Wiesenthal Center who were flying with Iberia Airlines to present an award to Queen Sofia of Spain.

The two Jewish authorities immediately protested to the executive director of Iberia. Shortly afterwards, *Response,* a Wiesenthal Center publication, brought out a text entitled "The Fiesta that Celebrates Hate", expressing "the Center's dismay over advertising for 'The Wild Cow' fiesta with its crude, racist stereotypes". They also demanded several kinds of public apology on the part of Iberia. Iberia, in turn, tried to explain to them that "there was no anti-Semitic content in this fiesta" (p. 69). Many letters were exchanged between Iberia and the Center, and in the end Iberia promised that "such a thing will never happen again" (p.70).

Nonetheless, the issue gained momentum when television entered the discussion. In a report on the "Wild Cow" festival broadcast in January 1995 by the U.S. network *ABC* and ceded to the Spanish *Canal +*, images of the festival were interposed with images featuring the holocaust, young neo-Nazis, survivors from concentration camps, and the word "anti-

Semitism" being repeated several times. The Town Hall of Fresnedillas instantly reacted and sued both *ABC* and *Canal+*, which in turn provoked "a flurry of media attention" (p. 72).

Sutton concludes his article saying that different reading strategies were used by different people involved in the episode, each one selecting some words and associations and excluding others. While the executive board of *Ronda Iberia* saw no anti-Semitic element in the festival, the Jewish authorities described it as an "ignorant form of pure antisemitism" (p. 69). In the end, Sutton sees his buffering strategy of not translating "motilones" in a way that could bring associations with the holocaust as "fighting a losing battle", because the text provoked indignation all the same. But Sutton's reflections on the case are absolutely valuable for our discussion here.

In answering the question about the translator's role in preventing such conflicts, he draws a lucid conclusion about the limited control translators and authors, for that matter have on the interpretations their texts will be subject to:

> In the case that has occupied us, the Wiesenthal Center's entire retextualisation of the fiesta was triggered by the word "Jews", and more specifically, as we have seen, by the multiplication of its referent to include the Jewish people both in concrete historical contexts and as represented in antisemitic festivals. (p. 75)

Thinking over the incident as a whole, Sutton asks himself whether he could have done anything different to avoid all the trouble. He sees two possibilities. One would be not to translate the word *judio*, keeping it in Spanish in the English text; but this, according to him, would be the same as denying that *Jews* is an English equivalent of *judios*. The other solution would be to ask the author or the editor to change the terms in the texts. And then he goes back to his choice, *friar*, and comes to a second conclusion. His was not an innocuous intervention, since neither the Jewish authorities nor *ABC* channel mentioned the second term throughout the whole affair. Had he translated *motilones* as "cropped heads", this would have been another source of protest.

Sutton's story touches upon very important issues related to translation, but to our discussion here perhaps the most relevant point is the idea that the translator can and should intervene in situations that may have explosive consequences. His buffering strategy had a limited effect. Indeed, the term "cropped heads" would have probably caused even more indignation, but the suggestion that the translator should discuss such matters with author and publishers is to be given more consideration. If in the last decades Translation Studies as a discipline has in various ways emphasized the active participation of translators — whether they are conscious of

that of not — in the text they produce, it is important to take a stand in "sensitive situations". Sometimes translators do not try to establish a dialogue with authors or publishers because in principle they are convinced they will not be heard.

I do not know if this was Sutton's case, but it is true that sometimes translators hide behind the curtain of arguments like "I have just translated it", while in fact they could act as true mediators. Sutton's reflections on the whole event are certainly productive for discussions about translation ethics, shedding light upon ways in which translators can be more effective in their social and professional roles of carrying cultural facts across cultural borders.

There are occasions, and this is a good example, in which it is useful to look into aspects of the original meaning of a word. The word translation derives from the past participle of the Latin verb *transfero*: *translatus*. The meaning of the verb *transfero* is 'to carry across'.

It so happens that translating is always crossing a border; to be more precise, it is taking something across a border. That something is necessarily a cultural thing. Now as it happens when we get across a geographical border to enter another country, there are many things, indeed most of what a common citizen owns, that can be taken across without any problem; but there are some things which we must officially declare we are taking with us, and there are a few things which we are expected to leave behind. The same happens when get across a cultural border via translation. Most of the texts can be carried across without any trouble; but there are some that must be officially declared for what they are, and there are a few which should not get across.

A cultural text, as a cultural tradition, could live in isolation for decades, perhaps even for centuries, within quite limited boundaries, without causing any trouble. But once that isolation is over, either through passive activities like any visitation from the outside or through active activities like any information exported from the inside, a cultural comparison is made. Translation is one of these active activities the consequences of which are multifarious.

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