Mediation as translation or translation as mediation?

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Widening the translator's role in a new multicultural society

ABSTRACT

Contrary to expectations, globalization is not accompanied by the use of a single language. It is obvious that the constant influx of people from other countries and cultures is producing changes in the way society is structured as well as in how relationships are established in the European Union (EU). These changes also affect interlingual mediation and the role that translators and interpreters (T&I) have to perform. They have to act in a great variety of settings and provide very different solutions for the situations they are faced with. Such a variety also leads to questions on the ethics of translation in public services, the acceptance of the varied forms of professionalism, the importance of the role that culture plays, and the consideration of different attitudes from society and its institutions. These questions suggest the need to discuss mediation as a form of translation or, the other way around, translation as a form of mediation.

Some scholars and practitioners in Western society still consider translators to be walking dictionaries more than cultural mediators; however, in some settings and under certain conditions translators participate more actively in the communication process, producing oral or written texts in which forms and words are manipulated to extend further understanding across cultures.

There are signs that this change is beginning to happen in both pragmatic business community and everyday society. In the former, there is an increasing number of publications focusing on cultural factors, as well as business courses on culture. There are also marketing policies to adapt products to the new consumers and common policies established by the corporate groups to avoid cultural conflicts.

In the latter, that is, in everyday society, and specifically when dealing with social affairs and migration, data show that at least some official institutions and non-governmental associations (NGAs) as well as those organizations providing help, consider T&Is to be cultural mediators, assigning them a wider role. Also this interlinguistic mediator assumes that part of his/her role is to

deal with issues and explain deficiencies in communication, even adding other related tasks (filling out forms, giving reports, offering phone help, etc.).

This study will draw your attention to the figure of the T&I as mediator, and will focus on two specific aspects: A) Attitudes towards the role of the T&I as an interlinguistic mediator; B) Notes on the debate about how visible the interlinguistic mediator as translator must be.

KEY WORDS: Community Interpreting and Translating, Mediation; intercultural communication; migration

I. Introduction

Recent changes in Western societies due, among other factors, to migration are producing a series of challenges and new answers in how a multicultural society that demands a new order and solutions to unthinkable problems in homogeneous societies is configured. These changes in the structure of the societies and in the way relationships are established (people's greater mobility, better communications, multicultural societies, the concentration of languages and different cultures over a short time and in a reduced space) affect the translator and interpreter´s (T&I) role too. It is not possible to think of the T&I as an errant dictionary or as a mirror that returns the image. It is necessary to admit, and not to suspect negatively that manipulating a text to make it comprehensible to the new receivers - even changing the form beyond the normal limits- is a translation.

Recent publications on Community Interpreting (Valero-Garcés & Mancho 2002, Brunette et al. 2003, Valero Garcés 2003, 2005, Garzone & Viezzi 2002) are a valuable contribution to the debate on the role of the T&I in public services, not only in countries owing their emerging multicultural societies to a constant influx of immigrants and refugees (e.g. Spain, Italy, Greece), but also in those countries accustomed to such a phenomenon but that experience a higher rate of people coming from other places (e.g. Germany, England, France). As for the role of the T&I in these changing societies two main tendencies can be appreciated: a) the consideration of the T&I as a professional in charge of taking a text from one language to another following the traditional principles of fidelity and adequacy; b) the consideration of the T&I as an intercultural mediator filling the breach between two cultures and languages and whose role is to favor the understanding of the different groups involved.

This second approach is the one that I am more interested in as it is the one that seems to be imposing on some circles and countries, for example, Spain. This new figure is closely connected to the immigration phenomenon and its activity can be included in what is being called Community Interpreting and Translating, or Interpreting and Translation in Public Services, an activity that, in spite of being older than conference interpretation, is still considered the poor sister in the world of translation and interpretation.

2. Attitudes towards the role of the T&I as an interlinguistic mediator

The role of T&Is in public services goes beyond traditional limits as they have to deal with cultural and educational differences, different conceptions of work, of family, of housecare, entertainment or even the differences attached to specific aspects as silence, respect for elders, or dress and eating habits. And these aspects can create conflicts and rejection that are intensified when the language is not shared and a translator is needed. This 'new' I&T corresponds to what Taft (1981: 75) describes as an 'interlinguistic mediator': a person who facilitates communication, understanding and action between people whose language and/or culture is different. His/her role consists of interpreting the expressions, intentions and perceptions of one group for the other in order to establish a balanced communication between them. It is, therefore, a person that possesses, apart from a deep knowledge of the languages, a high grade of cultural sensibility which allows him/her to negotiate the meaning between both cultures and be able to transmit it to the members of the other community.

However, the task of interpreting and translating in different public places (schools, supermarkets, banks, unemployment offices, hospitals), and even in some institutional offices is usually performed by volunteers in co-operation with NGAs who are used to dealing with people from other cultures who know different languages but who have not usually received any training as interpreters and translators. These are also the ones that frequently use what Müller (1989:737) calls "a conversation with translation," a modality different from conversation and from translation. The main difference is that in "conversation with translation" one of the speakers spontaneously assumes the role of mediator and serves as a cultural and linguistic bridge. Then, translation becomes a conversational modality negotiated at the time of the speaking, being used at certain moments- not always- throughout the conversation because, as Hernández (1997: 256) points out, not to abandon this translation modality when it should be unnecessary would go associated to a loss of the speaker's social image.

In this type of situations the interlinguistic mediator feels like a valid speaker who reproduces the message while paying more attention to intercultural communication than to the supposed fidelity to the transmission of the content, which could generate even more tension. For example, to explain the meaning of silence when the provider of services or the migrant remains silent. In this role the interlinguistic mediator should be allowed to obviate and to suppress or to add information. Then he/she must be allowed to reformulate the interpersonal components associated to speech (use of politeness, explanations of presuppositions, use of deictic elements, changes in the speech acts used), or to create an interpersonal relationship with the addressee of its translation. That is to say, the T&I as mediator, besides performing a reproducing task, is an active subject in conversation. In Hernández´s (1997: 257) words:

For the translator/mediator it is simply impossible to think of himself as someone who supplants the personality of another, as a mere vicar of another. What is more, this is also what those for whom the translation was done expect from him/her. So to not assume the responsibility that corresponds to him/her as a mediator could cause the translator to get a bad reputation, much more of course than the sometimes unavoidable infidelities that the audience simply cannot be conscious of.

Hernández is not defending the arbitrary transfer of information as some may think. It is not that the T&I enjoys freedom to do whatever he/she wants; it is simply that practice forces him/her to continually carry out a series of options that confirm the quality of a free agent.

Some other specific features that affect the role of the T&I as interlinguistic mediator are outlined as follows:

1. The ethnocultural differences of the involved parts, which may lead to racial, cultural or linguistic differences, and also to intensify inequality and tension. To avoid such situations one of the intercultural mediator's abilities must be to possess this global knowledge of both parts as well as know how to use those differences and how to insert them while working. The T&I must also avoid falling in "culturalist" misconceptions and being able to analyse the sociopolitical and ideological changes that many West European countries are undergoing.

2. The incidence of this differentiation in the existing relationship between the parts. The participants have certain knowledge regarding the Other. Their attitudes are conditioned by stereotypes, prejudices, fears or ethnocentric ideas that the intercultural mediator should keep in mind to guarantee the right communication.

3. The relevance of the mediator's cultural background- an endless open debate- on the ideal interlinguistic mediator. The options are at least three: a) to be bicultural; b) not to belong to either of the present cultures; c) to belong to one of them.

The opinions are also diverse. However, experience demonstrates that what really matters is that, first, the person have a great capacity to mediate, and second, that he/she have sensibility and capacity of observation and study of the involved cultural systems.

The debate is also open about the different role the T&I may perform. The distinction made by Cambridge (2002:), among others, between the 'advocacy' and the 'impartial' model are a good example. There are institutions- even those directly related to migrants - in which a more distant, noncritical attitude is defended, being the T&I considered as a mere reproducer of the message. This is, for example, the case of the interpreter's ethical code elaborated by COMRADE/SETI, one of the most active NGAs in the field of interlinguistic communication in Spain, which offers free translations and interpretations for migrants (OFRIM, 41:11). The two main recommendations are:

1. The interpreter should not assume other functions when he is interpreting than those inherent to his work.

2. The interpreter should not put him-/herself in the user´s neither the provider´s place.

To understand both points of view, on the one hand, considering translation as interlinguistic mediation and, on the other hand, considering T&I as the agent for the reproduction of the message in a different language, the distinction made by Hernández (1997: 253) between translation as an algorithmic activity or as a heuristic activity is particularly interesting. From a cognitive point of view, the fundamental difference between an algorithmic and an heuristic resolution of problems consists basically of the following: In the algorithmic resolution the T&I´s degree of implication in the process of transferring the information is minimum. In other terms, it is not properly "me," "my ego" who solves the problem, but rather the algorithm or recipe used as an instrument. In the heuristic resolution, on the contrary, the person that takes it to term feels fully responsible and linked to the process. In other words, in the heuristic resolution the person that transfers the information is completely involved, both intellectually and emotionally, being also the one who takes decisions. This attitude is closer to the concept of translation as mediation or 'advocacy'.

The main objective of translation in public services is to communicate specific information (health, educational, administrative, social) directly to a public that is also specific: people that belong to a

cultural and linguistic minority that generally possess a lower educational and acquisitive level than those that dominate the social reality of the country and that frequently ignore newcomers. Then, it is not difficult to assume that this task is conditioned by, as Roberts (1997:12) indicates, the fact that the culture of the minority group - and even more than the language - is not always understood by the majority group that offers the services to this client. In other words, translation in public services can be defined as the adaptation of a text to the necessities of a minority that cohabits in a country with a dominant majority. And the T&I can be considered a socio-cultural mediator who masters specific abilities and receives the appropriate preparation that go beyond the knowledge of the languages (or dialects) and cultures since certain specific intercultural abilities are also required. These are the abilities:

- to work with two languages, one of those which usually possesses an inferior social status and one that belongs to the dominant culture;

- to guarantee a certain neutrality and distance when working for one´s own ethnic community;

- to notice the lack of education or the cultural differences between both communities;

- to show ability to skills necessary as a linguistic and/or cultural bridge when dealing with specific topics that can be taboos for some communities;

- to know specific terminology and to be able to change register, or to adapt the text according to the necessities of the receiver's community.

I am not alone in calling for a wider conception of translation and interpreting. Hernández (1997: 248), as we have just seen before, defines translation from the perspective of intercultural communication and sees it as a fundamental element in the processes of social integration, and as an activity of an intersemiotic nature that allows- preserving the linguistic-cultural identities of the parts- dialogue between them and facilitates mutual enrichment. This type of translation is what Hernández (1997: 249) calls 'visible' as opposed to 'invisible' translation. The 'invisible translation' is a type of non-critical translation, lacking reflection and, in consequence, lacking also the possibility of guiding its products for this reflection. In this case the translator assumes a servile position and declaims any intellectual responsibility. This type of translation would correspond, for example, to the pattern followed by the scientific-technical translator, or when the readers share the same socio-cultural and even linguistic level, or when reproducing a literary work with the emphasis on the original text.

However, what happens when there is socio-cultural distance and translation is used as an element for integration? Should the translator be invisible? Is this pattern of 'silent translation' the most adequate? To answer to these questions Hernández puts the emphasis on the attention on the translation activity as a "vocational" activity instead of as a simple professional activity for which its practitioners are paid, allowing them to earn a living. As a vocational activity, and appealing to some studies on Psycholinguistics, the activity of translating can not be reduced to a merely conceptual operation but rather to an operation in which sensations and affections are also an integral part.

In this same line Lesch (1999: 93) writes:

Community translation is a means to an end, namely to equip the community with the necessary information and other means to develop skills for themselves. It is an attempt to balance the power relationship between the sender and the receiver by prioritizing the needs of the community. Effective, empowering communication between the author and the reader via the translated text implies that the translator needs to be on the side of the powerless, that is the reader.

Siegrühn (1992:33) comments: "The original concern about the quality of translation was replaced by the concern rather for the appropriacy and accessibility of the translation."

And Cluver (1992: 36) adds:

No society is homogeneous and translators need to be sensitive to the needs of different groups. Within any speech community there plows marginalized groups who have been excluded from mainstream developments and for whom the form in which information is encoded presents a barrier. [...] [The task of the community translator] is not only to make information available in another language (in a parallel manner) but to make it available to marginalized communities.

In short, translating in public services is a type of translation guided toward the reader and the effectiveness of the text. The purpose is not to produce a text as if it were an image returned by a mirror in another language, but rather a text open to reformulations and adaptations. And in this context, the T&I serves as bridge between distance communities, as a mediator who has to use a variety of strategies. For example, if the text is intended to inform the reader on his/her right to apply for a financial aid, the translator will provide the reader with the necessary information so that the migrant knows what he/she should do, explaining terms and concepts that are implicit or not necessary in the original text because they are intended for the majority. Here there is another example, in the treatment of topics like money, sex, food and drink, religion, death, illnesses like

cancer or AIDS that can be taboo in one society but not in the other, or simply be considered differently, the T&I has to intervene to prevent communication breakdowns and to facilitate social integration. From this position, the underlying objective of translation in public services can be to rectify the lack of equality in power relationships through language and, logically, the result of translating the same text for different cultural communities will be the production of as many texts as cultures involved (For a wider discussion of the topic see Valero Garcés 2001a, b, 2002, 2003, 2005)

3. Debate on the visibility of the T&I as an interlinguistic mediator

The next question is to decide what grade of intervention is advisable. This comment brings us to the endless debate on neutrality and distance as ethical principles. Mediators can belong to the minority culture or the dominant one. In the first case, as Bruno di Biasi (1987: 52) indicates, if they are members of the minority, they perform a double role: They work, on one hand, inside of and for their same community, often using their own language, and, on the other hand, they work with the host society at schools, in hospitals, or at work where they have to negotiate and exchange meanings with people that usually don't share the same language. The decisions that they have to make are not easy. And, a high degree of profesionalization is also required to produce appropriate texts, which neither provide too much information nor leave out implicit meanings. However, this profesionalization is not always achieved as most of the practitioners are volunteers or not very well paid, or who may have some preparation in mediation but without any training in translation and interpreting, or the other way around. At this point it should be said that it takes a long time not only to acquire professional recognition, but also for the practitioner himself/herself to become aware that he/she also needs linguistic, anthropological, sociological and cultural knowledge.

On top of this, the T&I has to fight against the lack of recognition in this profession, and the fact that is not very well-paid work, frequently preventing its practitioners to take the few available training courses, like, for example, in the case of Spain the program at the University of Alcalá, Spain, that offers specialization courses in four pairs of languages (English-Spanish, French-Spanish, Arabic-Spanish and Russian-Spanish) since 2000. (For further information see http://www.uah.es/otrosweb/traduccion).

This situation is not unique of Spain. Certain common characteristics are shared with other countries that have recently experienced the migration phenomenon, and even with some other (England, Sweden, USA) that have experience in this kind of activity as the participants in the II International

Conference on Public Service Interpreting recently held in Spain in April 2005 have revealed again (Valero Garcés 2005).

Some of the shared characteristics are:

- There are two main types of initiators of the process of translation: a) the government and its institutions, mostly dealing with health, legal, educational or administrative matters; b) NGAs, trade unions, or other associations working mostly with specific ethnic groups. In some countries, as for example, in Spain, this distinction also implies some specific features. (See Valero Garcés 2002.)

- The texts translated are usually of three types: a) information about social and institutional services, describing their functions, access way, etc; b) texts of a sanitary or administrative character that cover a wide spectrum of topics, from the merely informative, for example, on vaccinations or pregnancy to more specific ones as on how to legalize their situation; c) official (birth certificates, last wills) and semi-official documents (academic reports, commercial transactions, rental contracts). In the case of interpreting, interpreters have to intervene in many different situations (police stations, schools, hospitals, government offices) and on a great variety of topics too.

- The texts produced sometimes are intended to be reproductions of the original text and sometimes are adaptations for a specific community.

- The texts can include a specific terminology that often means a challenge for the interlinguistic mediator when not trained (as it often happens). The translator must also be conscious of the receiver in order to produce a text with the appropriate lexicon, register and style.

- The lack of adequate training and preparation of many practitioners in the context of public services (most of them volunteers) is a general claim.

Before concluding it would be worth adding some lines on this topic, taking Spain as an example. In a series of papers published on line by the Instituto Cervantes in 1999 (www.cvc.es), the situation was described as follows:

Communication between the government and the new population is not always as satisfactory as it should be. Spain wasn't prepared to deal with unknown languages and cultures. As a result translation and interpretation is marked by certain conditions such as: (1) many T&I's lack of appropriate formation and knowledge on the ethics of the profession as well as legal or specialized terms; (2) inappropriate procedures of recruitment are used by officials in public services (children,

relatives and friends working as I&T); (3) the lack of clear guidelines on the performance of these interpreters is often claimed; (4) the production of inaccurate translations or faulty interpretations that can deprive minorities of their rights are more common than desirable.

This situation does not seem to have changed significantly since then, however participants in the II Conference on PSI&T held in Alcalá, Spain, in 2005 and recent publications (Valero-Garcés 2005) shows new signs of change.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, EU countries are becoming more aware of the multicultural society that is being formed in Europe within its borders and they are also paying more attention to interlinguistic communication. Especially in those countries where immigration is a recent phenomenon, as for example, Southern countries (e.g. Spain, Italy, Greece), the first steps in training translators and interpreters as interlinguistic mediators, a topic very often neglected, are slowly being taken into consideration. A new breed of translators and interpreters who need to develop not only linguistic skills, but also cultural and anthropological abilities seems to be emerging. They have to bridge the gap between the newcomers and the host population. However, the controversy between the role they perform and the traditional role assigned to translators and mediators is still open.

There is also a long way to go to make translation in public services a profession comparable to that of the translator considered as a professional. The obstacles are numerous, being, in my opinion, economic, social and educational factors some of the most important barriers, as well as the recognition of this activity as a profession. A first step could be to widen the limits of translation and consider mediation as a valid form of translation.

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