Linguistic and cultural issues in translation: new insights

1. Re-visiting translation from a theoretical perspective

The act of re-visiting, with the meaning of re-analysing, re-evaluating and re-exploring, inevitably involves a return due to the need to formulate new ideas about something that may have changed. With reference to translation, these actions reveal its extremely mobile and fluid nature in relation to language, communication and, not least, globalization. This ever-changing state is the common thread that holds together the following collection of essays which, from different perspectives, present an insight into the state of the art concerning the long debated and multifaceted issue of translation.

The first two essays opening this collection offer a theoretical overview of Translation Studies and explore the development and main changes that have characterized the field in the contemporary world, with a specific focus on the concepts of translation as hybridity and as a basis for sustaining intercultural communication.

In the first place, globalization has led unavoidably to a rethinking about translation issues, inspired by a growing sensitivity towards problems of transfer and mediation processes. In the words of Bachmann-Medick (2009: 2),

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1 This paper is a joint production. Section 1 was written by Mariagrazia De Meo, section 2 by Paola Attolino, section 3 by Linda Barone and section 4 by Mikaela Cordisco. The “References” are jointly assembled, as the result of the shared research of the authors.
translation becomes, on one hand, a condition for global relations of exchange ("global translatable"), and on the other, a medium especially liable to reveal cultural differences, power imbalances and scope for action. An explicit focus on translation processes – something increasingly prevalent across the humanities – may thus enable us to scrutinize more closely current and historical situations of cultural encounter as complex processes of cultural translation.

When translation moves out of its mere linguistic and textual paradigm, it becomes a representative *leitmotif* describing culture and contemporaneity. The author shows how the ‘cultural turn’ of the 1980s within Translation Studies opened the way to what she calls the ‘translational turn’ that was triggered by eminent voices in the field (Bassnett 2005; Snell-Hornby 2006, 2009; Baker 2006). Going beyond Translation Studies, the new perspective on translation sees it as a process of negotiation and mutual trans-action in those fields that are generally concerned with culture and society such as anthropology, sociology, and so on.

In the process, the familiar categories of text-related translation, such as original, equivalence and faithfulness, were increasingly supplemented by new key categories of cultural translation such as cultural representation and transformation, alterity, displacement, discontinuity, cultural difference and power. (Bachmann-Medick 2009: 5)

Therefore, the need to re-visit translation and re-consider the category of *translation proper* is grounded in the perspective of a more comprehensive understanding of translation in the humanities. Nurtured by national, economic and ideological crises and by the spread of immigration and encounters with the foreign, translation issues are part of contemporary ‘informational’ and global society, where informational “indicates the attribute of a specific form of social organization in which information generation, processing and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power” (Castells 1996: 21). Material actions are replaced by immaterial, instant communication (Lash/Urry 1994) that intrudes upon and affects everyday life with translation as the main tool for the global flow of information. Both globalization and translation are interrelated forces, caught in the middle of a multi-ethnic movement of goods and people where, as Cronin (2003) points out, the search for a specific identity, or, from a translation perspective, of an independent original, is an anchor for stability and certainty even more
so than in the past. He takes this argument a step further suggesting that, on the contrary, translation shows that the core of language and culture is based on interdependencies and interconnections. Moreover, this new perspective reveals the importance of dependency, demolishing the myth of an independent original (Venuti 1995) that has helped to perpetuate the translator’s invisibility, disguising his/her presence under the pressure of monolithic entities such as the source and target texts. Ultimately it is translation that provides evidence of cultural interdependency.

The term ‘dependency’ has a dangerous ambiguity, the sense of a relationship that is sought and shunned, desired and condemned. [...] literary translation suggests that culturally there is no independency without dependency and the great unfettered Doer and Maker of the literary imagination may be not so much transcending dependency as concealing it. Translation reveals our multiple dependencies and the connectedness underlying the consoling fictions of absolute autonomy. It may indeed be the sum of our debts that constitutes our true wealth as peoples. (Cronin 2003: 40)

Far from being a source of instability and peril the concept of dependency leads to the acknowledgement of hybridity and diversity as basic components of linguistic and cultural issues across different genres. Going beyond the view of language diversity as an obstacle and of English as the neutral lingua franca that offers a solution to the issue of communication in the global era, globalization leads to a return to the role of the translator as a subjective mediator who disrupts and reconstructs the source text.

The issue of cultural difference, and the perspective from which this is considered, are central to how we interpret globalization. According to Nederveen Pieterse (2003), there are three perspectives to consider here. Firstly, it is the idea of difference that evolves around the concept of differentialism. This is expressed through a dramatic ‘clash of civilizations’ that reflects a world caught in a continuous struggle to impose one cultural system over another. Secondly, a reaction to cultural difference may lead to a tendency to what is referred to as McDonaldization (Ritzer 2012), the direct effect of consumerism, which tends to make everything the same. Finally, the concepts of hybridization and contamination bring an entirely new perspective to previous attitudes, blurring
the boundaries of a fixed idea about identity and difference that does not take into account contamination and contact between cultures.

Cronin suggests that difference should not be considered as antithetical to identity, basing his argument on a thorough analysis of the concept of cosmopolitanism, which is essential to our understanding of globalization due to the proliferation of social relations. Although it is antithetical to nationalism, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily imply the decline of an ethnocentric definition of identity. A negative interpretation of cosmopolitanism emerges from the fact that its multicultural relations may be still dependent on political and economic interests, fostering renewed forms of imperialism. Whereas, a positive idea of cosmopolitanism implies the encounter between cultures and the perception of displacement achieved through translation, whose studies should not be limited to literary translation but need to consider the multiple translational phenomena of people’s diasporas. This positive trait arises from a “micro-cosmopolitan movement” (Cronin 2006: 16) carried on by small ethnic groups which, although struggling to protect their identity and traditions, are forced into mobility and contact with different cultures, creating a space for negotiation and showing that difference is a source of strength for communities and for the concept of identity. Viewing translation as a “mutable mobile which operates within a topology of fluidity […] would usefully put paid to the conventional habit of dismissing translation as synonyms with loss, deformation, poor approximation, and entropy” (Cronin 2006: 28).

The concept of translation as transformation creates space for negotiation (Bassnett 2002), altering the traditional assumptions behind translation equivalence and encouraging transcultural and multicultural exchanges that generate a transformation on both sides. In this view the notion of translation is cultural bound and offers a new way to interpret social and political settings.

[O]ur understanding of translation has now developed to include important processes of displacement and alienation, of distinction and mediation. The path has, at least, been cleared for new methodological approaches to the “interstitial spaces” so celebrated by the humanities, by examining them as “translational spaces”: as spaces where relationships, situations, “identities” and interactions are shaped through concrete processes of cultural translation. (Bachmann-Medick 2009: 9)
Emilia Di Martino and Bruna Di Sabato’s essay offers a thorough investigation of the relationship between translation and hybridity, considering current styles and trends in contemporary writing and the way in which they are affected by the wide phenomenon of globalization. Elements such as flexibility and multifunctionality in source texts undoubtedly affect translation trends. Starting with examples of literary hybrid texts such as Zadie Smith’s White Teeth, Hanif Kureishi’s The Buddha of Suburbia and Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections and Twenty-Seventh City, the authors then move away from literary samples and look at more technical texts produced by non-native speakers in EU institutions to prove the point that hybridity spreads across genres, art forms and languages, although this is even more evident if we consider the rapid growth of English as a Lingua Franca. Preserving hybridity becomes a cultural trait of translation as shown in the hyperhybrid translation of Franzen’s Strong Motion that emphasises the scattered and multifunctional nature of the source text. However, this insight into globalization, multiculturality and hybridity brings the authors to reflect further on the effects and the changes in such concepts through the observation of new translation practices and trends. The counter effects of the global era that bring out a general fear for hybridity associated to instability often generate a return to local traditions as an act of self-defence. The effects of this tendency on translation are illustrated through an interesting reference to Terrinoni’s recent translation of Joyce’s Ulysses which is generally viewed as a simple and domesticated version compared to the one by Giulio De Angelis. Terrinoni’s work is an overt attempt to preserve traits of Irish identity. The authors argue, therefore, that focusing on the local might also bring about a change of direction in translation practices, leading to conservatism and thus producing a countertendency to hybridization with a regression phase as an almost inevitable response.

Paolo Donadio’s essay highlights the need to make a connection between cognitive theories and translation, in order to identify an appropriate theory for the analysis of subjective process-based mechanisms that are activated in the translator’s brain. Once the subjectivity of translation processes is accepted, a cognitive theory of language may be the most coherent theoretical framework in Translation Studies. On the basis of recent studies of translation theory based on a cognitive theory of language, DONADIO sheds light on the interaction between the two
fields starting from the consideration that intralingual communication involves translation and negotiation and raises considerations that are similar to those related to interlingual communication and translation. The author stresses the importance of moving away from Jakobson’s classification (1959) which argues that only interlingual translation deserves the label of translation proper. Translation occurs in every act of human communication; therefore intralingual rewording surely qualifies as a proper act of translation, refuting the structuralist distinction that considers translation necessarily related to a change in the coding system. The sender to receiver model activated in every act of communication corresponds to the source-language to target-language movement in translation. Since cognitive linguistics is grounded on the principle of meaning based on individual experience of the world expressed through verbal interaction, cognition and translation are both part of the study of language, as inevitably every act of translation activates cognitive processes of categorization and transformation. Along these lines, trying to make sense of communication involves a cognitive approach to translation and intercultural communication based on an ethics of difference. This does not allow the concepts of hybridity and multiculturality to be regarded as external and interfering forces in relation to subjective cognitive processes.

To return to Cronin’s argument (2006), translation should not be considered only as an issue emerging when crossing the borders of national languages but rather as a phenomenon happening inside languages, suggesting that translation is implicit in every act of communication.

2. Translation as cultural mediation

One of the etymologies of the word translate comes from the Latin “trans, across; and latus, carried, borne” (Skeat 1824: 660). This definition suggests the idea of a passage, a conveyance, a (re)creation, which entails a dialogue of cultures. As Gill and Guzmán (2010: 126) argue: