Institutional Silences:

The role of the translator in heritage narratives

Abstract

In the same way that they chose which objects to display from their collections or which parts of a building can be visited, museums and heritage sites present a sanctioned version of the past through the type and content of their interpretive material. This narrative is shaped by what Smith (2006) calls Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) and effectively serves to endorse the silencing of some (hi)stories in favour of a dominant narrative. With the ever-increasing popularity of international travel and heritage tourism, heritage sites are also increasingly confronted to foreign audiences and to the need to translate their interpretive material. In this context, translation plays an essential role for the circulation of this dominant narrative and of cultural knowledge. Yet, to date, there has been little research into translation for museums or heritage sites.

This paper explores the role of the translator in the linguistic and cultural mediation of the master narrative that heritage sites disseminate. By putting in parallel interpretive texts from Scottish heritage sites with their French translations in a comparative analysis based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1961), this paper surveys the different strategies used in translation to either sanction the dominant narrative or give voice to alternative interpretations: from absent translations that are just silence to poor translations where words are simply 'noise', from literal translations that reproduce the silences of the source text, to the *étoffement* of the target text that gives voice to other narratives.

Introduction

The idea behind this project dates a few years back when on a family visit to Blair Castle in Perthshire we were – at first pleasantly surprised – to find translated leaflets available in all the rooms of the castle. Upon closer look however, it turned out that most of the French

leaflets did not make any sense at all. As the other members of my group did not have a good understanding of English, I found myself sight interpreting the English leaflets for them. Being put on the spot in such a way, without time to prepare nor access to the necessary resources for research, I imagine that my instant translation was rather poor. We all enjoyed the visit but today none of us can remember much about it and I can reasonably say that we did not learn or retain much information.

After this somewhat disappointing experience I started paying more attention to translation when visiting heritage sites. I soon realised that the availability and quality of translations varied greatly across sites and this led me to turn this observation into a PhD topic.

Background

This project seeks to explore translation in a number of ways, including but not limited to availability, quality and translator intervention. As this is an interdisciplinary project, part of the theoretical framework focuses on Heritage Studies and more specifically on heritage interpretation.

Heritage interpretation

Have you ever wondered, when making your way through a museum or heritage site, what it is that you are *not* seeing? We are only seeing what the site managers choose to show us. For instance, museums often display only a small part of their collections to the public, heritage sites may restrict access to some areas of certain properties. Similarly, heritage sites present visitors with a sanctioned version of the past, through the type and content of their interpretive material. This practice derives from what Smith (2006) calls Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD thereafter). In essence, AHD serves to govern heritage practice. Incidentally, it also influences the narratives surrounding what is being preserved by granting professional experts (curators, historians, etc) with the power to decide which stories are worth telling. This practice effectively serves to endorse the silencing of some (hi)stories in favour of a dominant narrative and is essentially representative of a top-down approach to heritage

where a few impose their views on a public that is content with passively accepting what it is being told.

This vision, however, is not entirely accurate as there have been community-based movements for the conservation of heritage (the National Trust is maybe the best known example of this) and more recently there has also been a considerable turn towards participatory practices that show a growing concern from heritage sites to make their content accessible and adopt a visitor-oriented approach.

This idea of a "visitor-oriented approach" in turn raises the question: Why translate heritage?

Heritage translation

With the democratisation of international travel and heritage tourism, heritage sites are increasingly confronted to foreign audiences and to the need to translate their interpretive material. In this context, translation plays an essential role for the circulation of a dominant narrative and of cultural knowledge. My key research question here is how do the different approaches to heritage practice mentioned above influence the translation of heritage narratives? And what role, if any, does the translator play in this?

To put thus study in context, it is important to state that there has been little research into heritage translation. Scholars such as Pierini (2007), Sumberg (2004) or Valdeón (2009) often point to the lack of quality in tourism translation in general. Quétel-Brunner and Griffin (2014) and Valdeón (2015) have made the same observation about museum translation. But many also recognise the inherent challenges to heritage translation as an exercise in cultural mediation.

There is more to translation than simple transcoding from one language to another and the transfer across different cultural contexts means that translation is also an exercise in cultural mediation. There is no such thing as strict equivalence between source and target text, only options to choose from. In this context, the translator is – or at least should be – a cultural expert and for Tymoczko (2000, p.24) and Chen and Liao (2017, p.65) the translator's subjective choices have the potential to influence the representations of culture and national identity. For Deane-Cox, (2014, p.277), a foreign visitor is also a cultural and linguistic outsider

and so the translator is faced with the challenge of representing heritage to an individual "with no 'natural' affinity" with the history of a specific site. This raises another question, should the translator make the reader feel "at home" in translation, or should there remain a certain degree of alienation?

As mentioned above the production of AHD is inextricably linked to its institutional context and so beyond translation as an act of cultural mediation, some scholars have also been investigating institutional translation. Koskinen for instance, considers that institutional texts (such as the interpretive texts produced by heritage sites) are regulated by norms, values and belief systems (2011, p.55). Institutional translation, she argues, implies that the voice of the institution remains unchanged in translation, preserving the same communicative function, and with a standardisation of style and terminology (*ibid*., p57-8). She describes institutional translation as a form of self-or auto-translation where the institution is the author of both the source and target text (*ibid*., p.57).

The narratives of heritage institutions may well be endorsed by the interpreters and historians who write the material; however, the fact is that heritage trusts rarely hire in-house translators and are more likely to outsource translations in which case the translator does not belong to the institution for which they translate. This raises the question; how does the independent translator relate to the institutional norms? And how will they preserve or challenge the institutional voice? There is every chance that an external translator will be less familiar with the institution's vision and, could be less inclined to respect its norms if it were to challenge their own beliefs.

Methodology

To explore and better understand the role of the translator in the linguistic and cultural mediation of the master narrative that heritage sites disseminate, this project consists in conducting a series of case studies in order to compare original English texts from Scottish heritage sites with their French translation. This comparative analysis is based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (1961) to survey the strategies that sanction or challenge the dominant heritage narrative. SFL has the advantage of offering a repeatable benchmark

for translation analysis by considering that there exist three dimensions to the creation of meaning:

- Ideational meaning (also known as field) is the subject matter of the text (what the text is about)
- Interpersonal meaning (or tenor) considers the relation between author and reader (who is talking? To whom? And how?)
- Textual meaning (or mode) is concerned with the form, or how the text is composed (written/spoken, word order…)

Discussion

This project still being in its initial phase, there has yet been no occasion to do much, if any, data analysis. However, I have had the chance to share some very interesting conversations with Historic Environment Scotland and also had the opportunity to conduct a pilot translation project with the Falkirk Community Trust, all of which have been very thought-provoking.

The abstract for this paper made references to four different strategies for heritage translation and how these related to silences or breaking silences:

- Absent translations are just silence,
- Poor translations are simply noise
- Literal translations reproduce the same silences as the source text
- The *étoffement* (expansion) of translations changes the institutional voice and/or gives voice to other stories

Translation as silence

For absent translation it is quite difficult to show an example mostly because there is nothing to show but an interesting experiment to do is to go online, since this is where most things start nowadays. Imagine you are doing some research on your next heritage site visit. You will find that very few Scottish heritage sites have a translated website (into French or any other

language). The only exception I noticed so far was Abbotsford (the house of Sir Walter Scott) but the translation is provided by Google Translate, and machine translation is a different topic in itself. However, it is quite interesting to reflect on what non-translation says of an institution's approach to foreign language provision. For Valdeón non-translation is a "metaphor of the imposition of a certain representation of reality, where a dominant ideology selects and arranges material to perpetuate official narratives." (2015, p.374). The absence of translation, this effective silence, is likely to be to the detriment of visitor experience by creating a feeling of alienation even before the visit takes place.

Translation as noise

For this second example, I only have to refer to my introductory story. Blair Castle might have been a fantastic visit, but the quality of the translation meant that it was just noise, it filled a void with no constructive information. Here it is somewhat difficult to interpret the translator's role and one could suspect there might not have been a translator at all and maybe it was just another instance of machine translation use. Like for non-translation, poor translation quality points to the marginal position of modern languages. It is also symptomatic of an important misunderstanding of translation as an act of mechanical linguistic transcoding instead of the act of cultural mediation it truly is. When the translation is just noise, it serves to fill a void but unproductively so, more than anything it stands as an obstacle to the visitor's understanding.

Now, it is possible to move on to cases that are a little more interesting and to start thinking about the translation as an act of expansion and development of the source text or as an *étoffement*.

The case of Historic Environment Scotland

A member from the interpretation department at Historic Environment Scotland (HES), recounts a story about one of the biggest issues she has had with a translation commission; when a translator obviously made a lot of additions to a translation into French without HES's consent. The translator had adopted an approach which consisted in making the text fit with

the conventions of French interpretive texts which, as Guillot (2014, p.74) explains tend to be more academic than English ones. But by making all these modifications, the translator effectively changes HES' voice when the institution normally aims at producing interpretive material that is accessible to all. The same member of HES staff also explained that it was expected foreign visitors would feel some degree of alienation in translation as a result of the intrinsic differences to heritage practice that exist between Scotland (or the UK in general) and France.

The case of the Kelpies

This last example, focuses on a pilot translation project delivered for the Falkirk Community Trust and the Kelpies. The Kelpies are two monumental horse head sculptures that stand 30m high on the bank of the canal in Falkirk in Stirlingshire. They are a tribute to the industrial past of the Falkirk area: they are made of steel to represent the iron works that once drove the area's industrial development, and the giant horse heads represent the workhorses that were used for the transportation of goods on the roads and canals leading to Glasgow and Edinburgh.

As part of this project it was necessary to make changes to the interpretive material presented in the visitor centre, not because the type of information available was not suited to a French audience but because of the method of delivery. The exhibition in the visitor centre consists in a video animation with a voice over retracing the history of Falkirk and its region (figure 1). This history is also represented by a timeline that runs all around the 4 walls of the room with very little written text aside from occasional labels and dates (figure 2). For practical reasons it was not possible to provide a translation in the form of a French voiceover or of French subtitles to the video. Similarly, it would have been impossible to get new labels painted on the timeline on the walls. The only practical option was to produce a fully written text. However, this change of textual support also changed the mode of the interpretation.

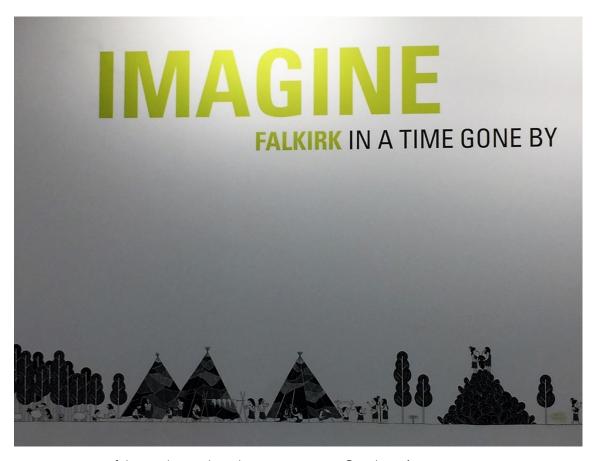Figure 1: Opening screen of the video animation at the Kelpies Visitor Centre ©Pauline Côme

Figure 2: Section of the timeline at the Kelpies Visitor Centre ©Pauline Côme

It was also necessary to add one key element of information to this material. Indeed, the exhibition makes strong reference to the industrial past of Falkirk and emphasises all the transformations that have taken place in the area through the years and centuries past. The idea of transformation is paramount because in Scottish folklore Kelpies are shape-shifting creatures that often take the shape of a horse. The legend of the Kelpies is explicitly not the main inspiration for the artwork, however, there is an obvious link between the legend of those shape-shifting creatures and the transformations that the region underwent. It could not be expected that French visitors would know what a Kelpie is, yet this cultural reference is the key to fully understanding the artwork and what it stands for. As a result, an entire paragraph was added to the French exhibition material, explaining the legend of the Kelpies and drawing an explicit link between the mythical creature and the history of Falkirk. There was also another reason for this addition, indeed according to VisitScotland (2019, p.10) French visitors to Scotland are rather attracted to Scottish folklore and here was an occasion to use folklore as a way to introduce Scottish industrial heritage. However, this addition affected the ideational meaning of the text.

Altogether, alterations to the mode and field of the document contributed to modifying its tenor or interpersonal meaning, by making the target text in the whole more academic than the source text and so creating more distance between author and reader. These deliberate modifications to the institutional narrative and voice of the Falkirk Community Trust was decided in concertation with the manager of the Kelpies which is a rare thing in the translation industry as interactions between commissioner and translator are often minimal and are often the reason why and how institutional discourse can be silenced or distorted without the institution's knowledge as was the case of the HES translation project mentioned above.

Conclusion

As we have seen from the few examples described above, the silencing or challenging of the institutional voice does not always stem from any sort of active resistance on the part of the translator. Often it is due to a misunderstanding of the translator's role and ability to introduce changes to the text when translation is still too often considered as a purely

mechanical exercise. As the example of the HES French translation project shows, institutions can remain quite protective of their narrative and be opposed to the idea of introducing changes. However, the pilot translation project for the Kelpies also shows that these changes can also be welcomed, when the translator is able to justify them. So, instead of thinking about the role of the translator in the silencing or challenging of institutional narratives, maybe it is necessary to first consider what silences or gives voice to the translator.

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