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Translation as intercultural mediation: setting the scene

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Abstract

This introduction to the volume examines the concept of intercultural mediation as it applies to the work of translators. To frame the discussion, it considers what it means for a translator to mediate between languages and cultures and the ways that mediation has been used in translation studies.

Keywords

Cultural diversity; translation theory; cultural values

On the face of it, the task in translation is to rework a text written in one language into another so as to make available to a new audience something they would not otherwise be able to access. This means that a translator is involved in communicating meanings that have been constructed in one language – with its accompanying cultural contexts for readers who share the language and participate in some way in that culture – to an audience that does not share that language and culture. Hence translation cannot entail simply reproducing the meanings of one text in another language; rather, after constructing a reading of the text and its intention, the translator must rearticulate meanings for new audiences. Through the medium of the translator's voice, multiple linguistic and cultural framings are brought into relation so that meanings may be communicated across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

As the agent of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the translator is in a mediating position between the writer and reader and also between the cultures of composition and reception. This view of translator as mediator is far from new. For example, in the 1960s Kade (1968) used the idea of linguistic mediation (*Sprachmittlung*) as a way of conceptualising the field of translating and interpreting studies. Thus, translation has been understood as a form of mediational work involving a positioning of the translator between two interlocutors who are speakers of different languages and acting to achieve communication where otherwise there would be no shared language. The translator as a linguistic intermediary can be understood in a number of ways. At a superficial level, the mediator can be seen as simply the channel through which communication is established; that is, mediation is little more than a description of the role of the translator and identifying translators as mediators brings little additional understanding to translators' work. Alternatively, the mediator can be understood as someone who undertakes some form of action to enable communication to occur; that is, the translator as mediator is an agent of intercultural communication and mediation is seen as a conscious, purposeful intervention into the act of communication. Understood in this way, the idea of mediation frames the act of translation as a complex engagement with meanings across languages and cultures (see Katan, 2013 for a discussion of these two ways of understanding mediation).

Although their understanding of mediation is different from the division discussed above, Hatim and Mason (1990) also view mediation in two ways. In their glossary, they define mediation as 'the extent to which text producers and receivers feed their own beliefs into their processing of a given text'. This view of mediation focuses on mediation of more than just language and gives an emphasis to the processes of translators' meaning making. They represent the act of mediation as an interpretative act in which those who perform operations on texts (writing, reading) bring into those texts their own interpretative frames. This view of mediation reflects Gadamer's (1960) view that understanding is an interpretative process shaped by the interpreter's prejudices (in the sense of prejudgments) or foreunderstandings (Vorverstehen). In this sense mediation is a cognitive process (c.f. Pöchhacker, 2008) that is a central act in the translator's coming to understand a text and representing it for a new audience. Hatim and Mason (1990, p. 223) use mediation with a second sense when they talk about the work of translators: 'Translators mediate between cultures (including ideologies, moral systems and socio-political structures), seeking to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning'. In this sense, the translator is an intermediary intervening in texts to achieve meaningful communication. It is this sense of the translator standing between languages and cultures that has tended to predominate in ways of conceiving the idea of mediation in theories of translation. This idea of translator being fundamentally involved in a process of mediating between cultures is central to Katan's (2004, 2013) work. Katan views translation as a way of bringing both languages and cultures into a relationship and recognises the significance of culture to meaning and thus to the rearticulation of meanings in another language.

Work in translation studies by scholars such as Katan (2004, 2013) and Hatim and Mason (1990), among others, has moved the idea of translator as mediator from a focus purely on mediating language to mediating cultures. In so doing, there is a recognition that meaning making is not simply a linguistic act, but rather that culture is a constituent element in the creation and reception of meanings. The translator's work is not limited to the text itself but to the text in its context, or what Yuste Frías (2010), drawing on Genette (1987), calls the paratext. For Yuste Frías, paratext is not incidental to the text and thus to its translation, but rather is central to the ways that the texts create meanings. Thus, he argues, any translation that does not consider the paratext is inevitably a failed intercultural communication. The focus on culture as a constituent part of text and hence of translation has largely developed out of understandings of translation as an act of intercultural or cross-cultural communication rather than just as interlingual communication (see, for example, Katan, 2009; Pym, 1992, 2004; Snell-Hornby, Jettmarová, & Kaindl, 1997). When texts are considered as culturally embedded products that need to be rearticulated for culturally diverse others through the act of translation, the idea of mediation in translation becomes a particularly powerful concept within the framing of translation as a meaning-making activity.

Viewing translation as an act of intercultural communication means that translation itself needs to be understood in more elaborated ways than the re-linguaging of texts and the scope of the translators' work in rewriting a text from one language into another similarly needs to be understood in more elaborated ways. In emphasising intercultural communication as an element of translators' work, however, the act of mediation has sometimes been conceptualised not as an activity inherent in translation but as something additional. For example, Clouet (2008, p. 148) argues:

[I]t is the translator and interpreter's role to reformulate a message, to communicate ideas and information from one cultural context to another without altering what is

expressed in the original text or speech through the language of the writer or speaker. This is the main reason why translators and interpreters *actually mediate rather than merely translate*, as their task is to facilitate the process of intercultural communication. (emphasis mine)

In so doing, he creates a dichotomy between translation, which presumably in this context is a linguistic act of rewording, and mediation, which is a culturally based action of meaning making. Such a dichotomisation is potentially problematic as it tends to reduce the complexity involved in any act of translation to operations on language rather than framing it in terms of operations upon meaning and recognising the inherent role of culture and language together in meaning making. Rather than separating mediation from translation, or seeing it as some additional activity beyond translation *strictu sensu*, it is much more important to see mediation as a constitutive element of the meaning-making process in which the translator makes sense of meanings and them to be understood by others (Katan, 2004).

Mediation is thus to be understood as an interpersonal activity focused on the interpretation and representation of meanings that takes place in the communicative space between writers and readers. This interpersonal dimension may be made more complex, and problematic, by pressures on the translator to become invisible, and to make the act of translation transparent (to use Venuti's (2006) metaphors), in which the audience reads a translation not as the product of another's language and culture but as a product of the language and culture into which a text has been translated. The audience may not be aware of, or give significance to, the act of translation that has produced the text being read. In this way, intercultural mediation of the translator may be 'off the record', at least in some contexts. At the other extreme, the issue of the translator's mediation can reflect the potential intersection between mediation and cultural appropriation in a text, or mediation and the discourse of power. Filtering down to the specifics, the translator's intercultural mediation is reflected in the need to negotiate culture-bound terminology, semantic gaps between languages, and the like.

The translator's work can be investigated from multiple perspectives. It can be seen in the ways translators position themselves between languages and cultures and engage in the processes of mediation. It can be seen in the ways that translators themselves are brought into the process of mediation through their education. It can also be seen in the ways that education in the processes and practices of translation is, or can provide, education in the process and practices of intercultural mediation. This volume aims to provide an opportunity to investigate such issues across a range of languages, cultures, and contexts.

About this volume

In the first paper, Anthony Liddicoat interrogates the idea of mediation as it applies to translation. His position is that intercultural mediation is fundamentally an act of interpretation in which languages and cultures are brought together as an interpretative act. He argues that mediation is not only an interpersonal activity in which the meanings that translators see in the text are rearticulated into another language for another audience but that it is also an intrapersonal activity, as translators make sense of meanings for themselves. Thus translators mediate for themselves as well as for others, and these processes together are central to the act of translating.

David Katan examines the problems that have emerged for translation as a field of work because of the perceived separation of translation and intercultural mediation as ways of bringing languages and cultures into a relationship. In this paper, Katan seeks to promote

recognition of the translator's role and status as that of intercultural mediator by critiquing ways that the idea of 'mediator' has been understood. He argues that prevailing understandings of mediation have been framed in simplistic terms, as transfer, rather than recognising the full complexity of meaning as culturally contexted and the translator as a sophisticated practitioner making interventions into complex linguistic and extralinguistic realities in the processes of meaning making. Katan argues that the limitations that exist in understanding the nature of translators' intercultural mediation has led to a vacuum in which other options are emerging to cater for the ever increasing need for translation and intercultural mediation that potentially marginalise translators and interpreters, who are left simply with issues of linguistic transfer as their domain.

The next three papers focus specifically on issues relating to literary translation and show different aspects of the intercultural mediation of translators.

Kevin Windle's paper deals with an unusual example of intercultural mediation: the translation of nineteenth-century accounts of travel to Australia written by Russians into English for an Australian audience. Windle describes this activity as 'back translation' in the sense that experiences that were originally of an English-speaking culture have been mediated first for Russian audiences and then need to be re-mediated back to an English speaking audience. In working as intercultural mediators for such a text, the translators have needed to preserve a sense of the unfamiliarity of the original authors in talking about contexts with which the readers of the translation are likely to be highly familiar. In this case, the mediation is complex, as the text cannot be so distant from the audience that it ceases to be familiar or so close to the readers' experience that the sense of discovery and dissonance experienced by the original authors is lost. Intercultural mediation can thus be seen as more than something that makes meanings available to a new audience; it must also bring perspectives of readers and writers into particular constellations of relationship.

Isobel Graves examines the ways four translators of Dante have dealt with the problem of translating metaphoric meaning. In the case of Dante's text, translators not only have to mediate between Italian and English but also need to mediate between temporally disjunctive cultures with different conceptual frameworks. Graves shows, through an analysis of the different translators' ways of dealing with the same metaphors, how each translator approaches the text and makes meaning of the text for English language audiences. She shows that translators may work to preserve metaphors as they mediate meanings but that metaphor may also be the site of creative rewriting. The mediational work of the translator can vary between micro-decisions that make slight adjustments to metaphors to transmit meanings and more radical attempts to re-invest the text with meanings through choices that have greater contemporary relevance.

Mina Saito's analysis of the translation work of Japanese translators of Western texts during the Meiji period shows that the work of translators as intercultural mediators has the potential to transform the societies for which they produce their translations. In this case, the translators' language choices in mediating Western texts have changed grammatical and stylistic possibilities in the Japanese language. Thus, mediation can involve more than representing meanings from one language in ways that are comprehensible for speakers of another and may include a dimension of moving the reader towards the cultural or linguistic reference points of the writer (c.f. Schleiermacher, 1813/1963). Saito shows that, where multiple translators adopt the same solution for mediating new meanings, the mediational activity ceases to be an individual solution to the transfer of meaning and instead becomes a stylistic feature of translated literature, and eventually of literacy composition.

The final four papers examine a range of different contexts and show how intercultural mediation is central to the practice and use of translation.

In contrast to the other papers in this volume, which focus on written text, Michelle Kohler's paper examines the nature of intercultural mediation in interpreting. She analyses an instance from a workshop in which an Australian academic is providing training for a group of Indonesian midwives. She investigates the ways that the interpreter mediates the talk of the presenter in order to respond to the cultural realities of the audience. The interpreter, as a member of the local community and as a mediator between members of different cultures, works at the minor-level of the interaction to deal with not only the meanings being presented but also the situated social relationships that exist between participants. In her analysis, Kohler shows how various activities of the interpreter respond to the intercultural and interpersonal realities of his task, not only through his choices in interpreting but also in his self-positioning as someone who interprets local realities for the outside expert.

Andrew Scrimgeour brings the discussion of intercultural mediation into the field of lexicography, examining an early Chinese–English bilingual dictionary compiled by Robert Morrison in the nineteenth century. As a lexicographer, Morrison positioned himself as a mediator between two cultural and linguistic contexts that were not only distant from each other but relatively unknown to each other. Thus, in the act of compiling the dictionary, Morrison not only wanted to provide translations of individual words but also wanted users of the dictionary to understand the enculturated ways of using language associated with those words. Scrimgeour presents an analysis of the ways that Morrison developed his dictionary not simply by finding English translation equivalents for Chinese equivalents but also by presenting extended entries that included contextual information that revealed the cultural significance of the meanings involved. Scrimgeour's paper, like Saito's, is a reminder that intercultural mediation works on many levels: not just at the level of text, which has been the focus of the other papers in this volume, but also at the levels of word and structure.

Christopher Hogarth's examination of Italian immigrant literature, written collaboratively by Africans and Italians, considers a quite different context for translation. In this case, it is not the translation of previous literary texts but rather the translation of largely oral stories developed and conceptualised within one cultural and linguistic context into literary productions in another. Hogarth's analysis reflects Salas Salvador's (2005) idea of minority/transcultural literatures as translational acts in the form of transcreations of texts at the confluence of linguistic and literary systems, but in the case of Hogarth's texts, the presence of the Italian collaborators adds an extra translational dimension to the act of transcreation. In these literary collaborations, the Italian writers re-language the African storytellers' experiences to place representations of their lives in Italy into Italian discourse and thus create an Italian voice for African experience. The collaborators mediate between languages and cultures to mediate minority, immigrant experiences for readers from the dominant linguistic and cultural regroup.

In the final paper in this volume, the emphasis shifts from the work of translators to education. The status of translation in language teaching and learning has been controversial for some time (for a fuller discussion see Cook, 2010). Angela Scarino's paper contributes to this debate by focusing on the implications of the translator viewed as intercultural mediator for understanding the role that translation has in learning. Scarino begins from the understanding that translation, broadly understood, is a real-world activity for plurilingual individuals, including language learners, as they seek to engage with meanings created across languages. This paper critiques older orthodoxies about translation that have either reduced it to simple

language practice or rejected its place as an educational activity, and argues that when translation is recognised as involving intercultural mediation as a central component of meaning making, this recognition opens new and significant opportunities for an educational focus on translation. In particular, Scarino highlights the need for language learners to analyse and reflect on their translation work to develop insights into the processes of meaning making and to come to a deeper awareness of the roles of language and culture in constructing ways of creating and interpreting meanings. This paper shows that new ways of thinking about translation in translation studies have significant implications for other fields of language work. These papers cover a range of topics and themes in relation to the translator as intercultural mediator. What they have in common is a view that translation is inherently a work of mediation, although this mediating role has not always been recognised in theory or practice. They show that mediation is a complex process in the work of translators that requires both recognition and further exploration in all contexts in which translation is used. As studies of the nature of mediating work, they also show that recognition of the mediating role of translators is central to the recognition of what it is that translators, as language professionals, bring to intercultural communication.

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