What is Really Lost in Translation?
Some Observations on the Importance and the Ethics of Translation

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1. Introduction

Almost every time that someone compares the translation of a text with its original, the quality of the translation is rarely awarded with overall positive comments: there is always 'something missing', there are always some aspects of the original that are inevitably 'left behind', even when it is recognized that the translator 'has done a remarkable job'. Whenever someone compares a text to its translation, there is always a feeling that the 'original text has lost many of its qualities in translation'. There are far too many examples which could evidently support this type of assertions, both in literary texts and in texts of other linguistic genres, due not only to the specific cultural and grammatical differences between the source and target languages concerned, but also, sometimes, to the inattention or inaccuracies of the translator(s) or of the automatic translation systems used to translate a text.

The following paper aims to identify the reasons behind this 'sense of loss', and to suggest an alternative interpretation of it, by describing some practical examples of translation and by illustrating the ethical and theoretical implications involved in the translation of any text, in order to be fully aware and to re-evaluate the complexity and the importance of this process.

2. What can be lost in translation: some examples

The first example described in the following paragraphs concerns a rather interesting case of wrong translation from English into Italian appeared in a series of law proposals, draft opinions and other legal documents[1] issued by the European Parliament and the European Council from 2001 onwards, regarding the definition, description, presentation, labelling and the protection of geographical indications of spirit drinks. The

majority of these documents have been written originally in English and translated subsequently into several European languages, including Italian. They can be consulted by any citizen and they are published on the eligible EU Institutions web pages, as provided for in Regulation 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and the Council regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents (EUR-Lex web site 2007). Notwithstanding the importance given to the publicity of every activity of the EU institutions, the key term 'spirit drinks', subject matter of these legal texts, has been translated into Italian through the expression '*bevande spiritose*' [funny drinks] (see fig. 1 and 2 below):

Figure 1. Draft Opinion of the European Parliament AM\631064EN – English Version (European Parliament web site 2007)

Figure 2. Draft opinion of the European Parliament AM\631064IT – Italian version (European Parliament web site 2007)

Such a striking mistranslation generates inevitably a series of tragic consequences in the target text (from now onwards TT), since it creates an expression that does not make sense in the target language (from now onwards TL) and it introduces a humorous dimension in the TT which neutralizes the formal and serious register characterizing the linguistic style of legal texts.

Furthermore, this error has been subsequently repeated in many other Italian translations of documents related to the topic of spirit drinks, as shown in figures 3 and 4 below. Figure 3 contains the three most recent Italian translations issued by the EU regarding some law proposals for the regulation on the definition, design and labelling of spirit drinks:
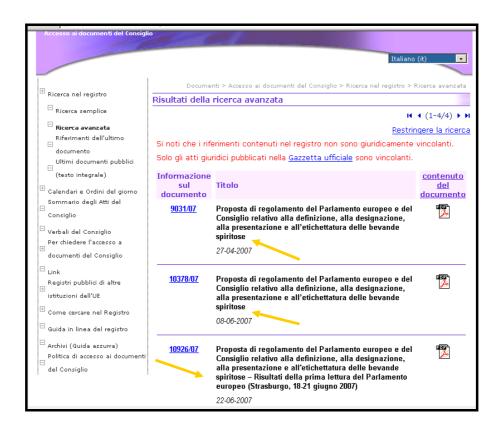
Figure 3. Search results of the most recent EU documents containing the expression 'bevande spiritose' (European Parliament web site 2007)

Figures 4 and 5 respectively show a list of three documents of correction in Italian and an extract taken from one of this documents, still reporting nonetheless the erroneous expression '*bevande spiritose*':
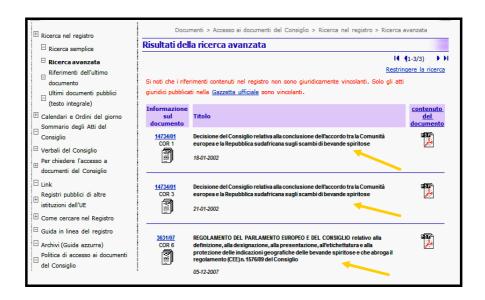
Figure 4. Some documents of correction in Italian still reporting the expression 'bevande spiritose' (European Council web site 2007)
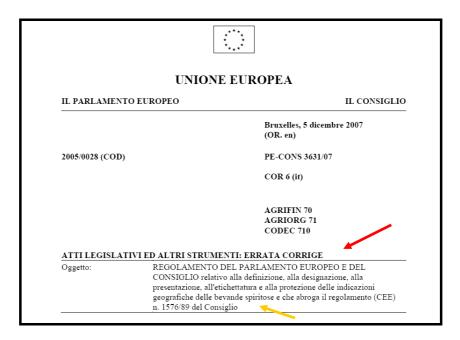

Figure 5. An extract taken from the Italian corrigendum PE-CONS 3631/07 COR 6 (European Council web site 2007)

Considering the high frequency of this error, it is plausible to believe that the responsibility of the wrong translation does not lie exclusively with the incompetence of a stubborn translator, who has constantly translated every document regarding the regulation of the same topic (an extremely unlikely situation to happen for any translator working for the EU), and constantly repeated the same mistake. The blame of this error can reasonably be given to the 'blind competence' of a translation machine, which considered the term *spirit* as an adjective and 'correctly' agreed its translation, in genre and number, to the term *drinks*, thus suggesting the corresponding Italian adjective *spiritose* [funny]. The machine did not recognise the sequence '*spirit drinks*' as a whole expression and, consequently, did not suggest the correct Italian translation '*super alcolici*' [spirit drinks]. This example should make us deeply reflect about the reliability of translation machines and, most of all, about the management of translation services and editing systems in such an important institution as the EU, but these are problems that it will be better to discuss in a different context of analysis.

The previous example represents just one of the many cases in which the translation has betrayed the original text at the level of "individual lexical choice" (Mason 1992: 28), probably the most evident (and frequent) phenomenon of mistranslation. This type of errors may often have severe repercussions on the overall meaning of a text, by destroying for example the cohesive network intended in a source text (from now onwards ST) and created through the recurrence of specific terms or lexical constructions throughout the text. Sometimes in fact, even just a single word or expression not correctly reported in translation, because of "mere carelessness" (ibid.) or to a certain degree of "manipulativeness" (ibid.) on behalf of the translator, may deviate the communicative effect intended by the author of the ST or by the commissioner of the translation. However, mistranslations may also occur at other linguistic levels, such as those involving discourse organization and thematic structure. Concerning discourse organization, translators modify very often the order of the thematic structure of a ST, thus changing the communicative perspective of the text in translation. To briefly explain the concept of thematic structure, it would be worthy to remind that every clause consists of two elements: a *theme* (what the clause is about), and a *rheme* (what the speaker/reader has to say about the theme) (Baker 1992: 121-124). The *theme* acts as a point of departure and provides a point of orientation for the reader (that is what the speaker is talking about) and a point of departure to create a sense of continuity within the text (coherence). The rest of the clause is called *rheme*

(what is said about the topic: *rhema* in Greek) and it generally consists of what the speaker or writer wants to say about the *theme* (Baker 1992: 121-124).

The following examples clearly illustrate the significance of the thematic progression in a text and in its potential translation. Figure 6 and 7 show respectively a page of a tourist leaflet written in English describing the main attractions of the Tower of London, and its corresponding Italian translation.
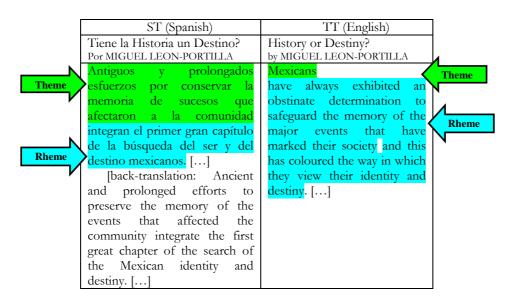

Figure 6 and Figure 7. Tourist leaflet of the Tower of London and corresponding Italian translation

In some cases, we can observe that the thematic structure of the TT evidently differs from that of the ST, such as in the translation of the first section describing *The Crown Jewels*, in which the rhematic temporal

information about the topic "since the beginning of the 14ᵗʰ century" is put in thematic position through the sentence "Sin dagli inizi del XIV secolo", thus giving more emphasis to the long history of the *Crown Jewels*. Also the description of *The Medieval Palace* has a different thematic structure in translation: the TT puts the sentence "Oltre a fortezza" 'as well as fortress'[2] in theme position, whereas this sentence represented part of the rheme information included in the ST phrase "was a residence for the kings and queens of England as well as being a fortress".

A different arrangement of the thematic structure may also distort the ideology(-ies) behind a ST, such as shown in the following table containing a short extract taken from an example cited in Mason (1992), which illustrates how the English translation of a Spanish text published in the *Unesco Courier*[3] altered the thematic structure of the ST in such a way that the final English TT downgraded the rhetorical purpose of the Spanish version, whose scope was the promotion of the indigenous cultures and the re-interpretation of their history:

Table 1. Example of different thematic structure in ST and TT;
adapted from Mason (1992: 27-28)

ST (Spanish)	TT (English)
Tiene la Historia un Destino? Por MIGUEL LEON-PORTILLA	History or Destiny? by MIGUEL LEON-PORTILLA
Antiguos y prolongados esfuerzos por conservar la memoria de sucesos que afectaron a la comunidad integran el primer gran capítulo de la búsqueda del ser y del destino mexicanos. […] [back-translation: Ancient and prolonged efforts to preserve the memory of the events that affected the community integrate the first great chapter of the search of the Mexican identity and destiny. […]	Mexicans have always exhibited an obstinate determination to safeguard the memory of the major events that have marked their society and this has coloured the way in which they view their identity and destiny. […]

(Theme and Rheme labels are indicated by arrows pointing to the respective sections of the ST and TT columns.)

Apart from all the other translational strategies that resulted in several and excessive lexical changes and paraphrases, this example shows that the theme of the ST "ancient and prolonged efforts" has been completely

modified in the TT, in which the new theme is represented by the addition of the term "Mexicans": this element was not even explicitly reported in the ST and reference to it might be only retraced in the ST expression "búsqueda del ser y del destino mexicanos"[4], which constitutes part of the rheme section of the ST. Therefore, the new TT theme has heavily changed the point of orientation intended in the ST, putting the people in the theme position (Mason 1992: 31) and moving the emphasis away from the historical efforts made by Mexican community for preserving the memory of their history.

It could be argued that a different arrangement of the *theme* and the *rheme* of a sentence may be often due to the necessity of conforming the translation of a text with the typical syntactical structures of the TL. Nonetheless, this type of variations can radically alter the orientation intended by the author of a ST and they can consequently distort the communicative goal of a text, as just shown in the previous example.

3.   *The Ethics of Translation*

In the light of these considerations, it seems therefore necessary to define or redefine in a clear way the principles that should regulate the ethics of translation and the general perception of this ethics by the public. In fact, notwithstanding the many cases in which it could be easily affirmed that something is always lost in translation, it is too easy to blame exclusively translators and the translation process per se of this type of lexical and/or semantic loss. We should investigate the causes behind this loss by identifying the principles that regulate, or better, that should regulate the process of translation, in order to re-appraise the importance of this process and promote public awareness of all the implications involved in translation, too often stigmatized as a reductive and damaging procedure of simple transposition of an original text from one language to another.

The most important translators' associations have already adopted detailed codes of conduct stating the ethical responsibilities involved in the process of translation, such as *The Translator's Charter of the International Federation of Translators* (FIT), which has an entire section describing the main duties required to a translator. The table below contains the first seven articles on the "general obligations of the translator" included in the FIT Chart. They firstly outline the role of translation as an "intellectual activity", thus   recognising   the   translator's   responsibilities   concerning   the

interpretation of a text (art. 2 and 3) and indicating the principle of *fidelity* to the original as a "moral" and, also, "legal obligation" for the translator (art. 4). The concept of fidelity is further explained through the key distinction indicated between "faithful" and "literary translation" (art. 5): a faithful translation could be defined as a translation reproducing the sense, form and functions intended (to a certain extent and with some possible exceptions[5]) in the ST, whereas a literal translation consists of a mere word-for-word transposition of the ST terms into the corresponding TL linguistic elements. A literal translation would not "render exactly the idea and form" expressed in an original text and consequently would not adhere to the ethical principle of fidelity.

Table 2: Extract taken from the FIT Translator's Charter (FIT web site 2007)

GENERAL OBLIGATIONS OF THE TRANSLATOR

1. Translation, being an intellectual activity, the object of which is the transfer of literary, scientific and technical texts from one language into another, imposes on those who practise it specific obligations inherent in its very nature.

2. A translation shall always be made on the sole responsibility of the translator, whatever the character of the relationship of contract which binds him/her to the user.

3. The translator shall refuse to give to a text an interpretation of which he/she does not approve, or which would be contrary to the obligations of his/her profession.

4. Every translation shall be faithful and render exactly the idea and form of the original – this fidelity constituting both a moral and legal obligation for the translator.

5. A faithful translation, however, should not be confused with a literal translation, the fidelity of a translation not excluding an adaptation to make the form, the atmosphere and deeper meaning of the work felt in another language and country.

6. The translator shall possess a sound knowledge of the language from which he/she translates and should, in particular, be a master of that into which he/she translates.

7. He/she must likewise have a broad general knowledge and know sufficiently well the subject matter of the translation and refrain from undertaking a translation in a field beyond his competence.

Also the code of conduct of AITI (the Italian Association of Translators and Interpreters) states in its 6th article the terms of loyalty and fairness expected from translators and interpreters:

Table 3: Extract[6] taken from the AITI code of conduct (AITI web site 2007)

Articolo 6. Dovere di lealtà e correttezza
Il traduttore e l'interprete devono svolgere la propria attività professionale con lealtà e correttezza.
Al traduttore e all'interprete è assolutamente vietato trarre un utile personale da informazioni di cui vengano a conoscenza nell'esercizio della professione.
L'interprete deve svolgere il proprio incarico con obiettività ed equidistanza, e l'interprete di tribunale deve tenere sempre presente il fatto che opera nell'interesse superiore della Giustizia.
Il traduttore deve eseguire a regola d'arte e personalmente l'incarico affidatogli.

However, even if the principle of fidelity and the terms of loyalty and fairness seem to be straightforward and easy to put into practice, it is undeniable that translation is still considered as a simple process of word-transfer, not requiring too much effort and time to be completed. Translation commissioners and the general public are frequently unaware of the cultural, social and even legal implications involved in the translation of any text, and this situation leads inevitably to a series of timing and economical pressures on translators, who are expected to work as quickly and cheaply as possible, thus negatively affecting the quality of their work and underestimating their results. We should always consider, instead, that the difficulties involved in the work of translators consist precisely in finding a balance among the loyalty to the ST, the loyalty to the readers' expectations and the timing and economical pressures imposed by translation commissioners. We should always keep in mind that the work of translators consists in continuous attempts at answering these fundamental questions, which represent the central issue of Translation Studies and of its multidisciplinary debates: "Where do the translator's loyalties lie? With the letter of the source text or with the expectations of the readers of the target text?" (Mason 1992: 24). For many centuries in fact, linguists, philosophers, historians and communication and cultural studies experts have analysed and discussed the role of translation and its implications, and some of them[7] considered translation a dilemma without any possible solution, claiming

that the specificity of each culture and of its related language of expression cannot be transferred into other cultures simply because languages are the specific reflection of the culture they belong to, thus impeding any possible equivalence between languages and cultures and consequently the reality of the concept translation (Munday 2001).

However, as affirmed by the philosopher Paul Ricouer (1996: 4) "languages do not form closed systems which exclude communication", and "if that were the case, the difference between linguistic groups would be similar to the biological differences between living species" (ibid.). Quoting again the French philosopher, it can be affirmed that "if there is only one human race, it is because *transferences of meaning are possible*[8] from one language to another". Hence, translation represents a process that raises "the distinctive spirit" of a target language "to the level" of the source language, a process that consist in "living [and recognizing[9]] the other, in order to take that other to one's home as a guest" (Ricouer 1996: 5). We might have the feeling that 'something is lost in translation' because of the polysemic inner nature of language, whose random (and perhaps imperfect) combinations of words, syntax, morphology, etc. generate several 'layers of meaning' that leave always room for misunderstanding, even among native speakers, and particularly among different languages. However, this 'imperfection' does not represent a negative feature, quite the reverse: it represents the intrinsic value of human communication.

Nothing is lost in translation then: it is only through translation that we can realize the rich complexity of the levels constituting the codes of communication, and it is only through translation that we can overcome the "rigid and arrogant perception of cultural identity" (Ricouer 1996: 7) even when the events tend to "freeze the history of each cultural group into an identity which is not only immutable but also *deliberately* and *systematically incommunicable*[10]" (Ricouer 1996: 7). Baker (2001) confirms this perspective, since she states that "a translator's behaviour is often the result of conflicting loyalties, sympathies and priorities – precisely because *a translator, like any human being, does not have just one identity but many*[11]" (Baker 2001: 8). It is extremely important then to be aware of the complexity of phenomena involved in every translation, and instead of being scared by this complexity and by the efforts (and the costs) it requires to be fully interpreted and transmitted, we should "celebrate it" (Baker 2001: 8), since through translation we are allowed to compare cultures and exchange values, we can discover new worlds, acquire new terms and enlarge, therefore, our knowledge and the boundaries of our own culture.

4. Conclusions

Translation is not only a passive mirror that simply reflects the limited common traits between cultures: translation is an active tool that allows us to recognise both the differences and similarities across cultures and to create an image that encompasses these differences and similarities. In this way, it can contribute to social, cultural and geopolitical changes, and perhaps this is one of the reasons behind past and contemporary attempts to boycott and underestimate the importance of translation[12].

Communication is a complex phenomenon involving the combined participation of cultures, communities and of single human beings; therefore translation should not be considered any longer as a simple reflection of linguistic elements from one culture to another, and even if sometimes it seems that many elements are lost in translation, this analysis has tried to demonstrate that what is really lost in translation is the *deceptive pretension of creating equivalence between cultures*. And after all this is not a negative loss, on the contrary: being aware of the differences between cultures represents a further step towards the evolution of our knowledge and towards the well-deserved recognition of the role and power of translation in the construction of really intercultural societies.

Notes

[1] The first document reporting the wrong translation *bevande spiritose* was the Italian version of the Proposal 11555/01 published in the Register of Documents of the European Council on September 4, 2001. To date, the Register of Documents of the European Parliament and the Register of Documents of the European Council include respectively 23 and 56 documents in Italian still reporting this mistake (European Parliament and European Council websites 2007).

[2] The translation of this sentence is moreover incomplete, since the translator has omitted the verb "to be": the correct translation should have resulted into the sentence "oltre ad essere una fortezza" [as well as being a fortress].

[3] The UNESCO Courier is a monthly publication of UNESCO, published in several languages. The text quoted in Mason (1992) was published in 1990 on the volume XLIII, issue 4 of the Courier: it was written by Leon Portilla and its original title was "Tiene la Historia un Destino?", translated in the English version of the Courier as "History or Destiny?" (UNESCO website 2007).

[4] Back-translation: [search of the sense of being Mexican and of the Mexican destiny].

[5] Sometimes a translation commissioner could require a TT with different functions from those of the ST. If we hypothesise for example a situation in which a contemporary editor commissioned a translation of a Shakespearean tale addressed to an audience of children, the TT would clearly have different functions from those originally intended in the ST: first of all, the translation should not fulfil exclusively an aesthetic expressive function, but it should also have an additional pedagogical purpose, deriving from the need to teach a Shakespearean tale to foreign children. This function would inevitably have some effects in the strategies applied for the translation of the tale, which could include strategies of explicitation (i.e. the insertion of explanatory glossaries or notes), simplification (e.g. the adoption of a simpler style to cover the temporal and cultural gap between the intended readers and Shakespeare's work) etc. For more detailed analyses about the strategies of translation, the concept of fidelity and equivalence and the definition of textual functions in translation see also Baker (1992, 1996), Munday (2001) and Nord (1992, 1997).

[6] Back translation: [Article 6. Duty of loyalty and fairness / The translator and the interpreter must undertake his/her professional activity with loyalty and fairness. / The translator and the interpreter are strictly forbidden to gain personal profit from any information they might acquire during the execution of their profession. / The interpreter must carry out his/her task with objectivity and equidistance, and the Court interpreter must always keep in mind the fact that he/she is working in the superior interest of Justice. / The translator must carry out professionally and personally the task given].

[7] E.g.: Deconstruction philosophers as Jacques Derrida.

[8] Emphasis added.

[9] My addition.

[10] Emphasis added.

[11] Emphasis added.

[12] Among the example of intolerance and violence towards translators and/or interpreters, we could briefly mention the persecutions inflicted to the movements sponsoring Bible translations during the medieval period, seen at the time as an ideological danger for society (Tymoczko 2000: 25), or the many English-Arabic translators and interpreters killed in Iraq during the last years of conflict by fanatics who consider them as spies of the 'foreign invaders'.

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Internet Resources

AITI (Italian Association of Translators and Interpreters) website: http://www.aiti.org/ [last accessed 17 December 2007];

EUR-Lex website: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/index.htm [last accessed 17 December 2007];

European Council website: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?lang=EN [last accessed 17 December 2007];

European Parliament website: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/default_en.htm [last accessed 17 December 2007];

FIT (International Federation of Translators) website: http://www.fit-ift.org/en/home.php [last accessed 17 December 2007];

UNESCO website: http://portal.unesco.org [last accessed 17 December 2007].