Extending the Borders of Translation and Translation Studies: Cultural Translation as a Portal

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Abstract. The essay explores the evolving conceptualisation of translation, moving from a traditional focus on linguistic aspects to an expansive cultural and metaphorical approach. It analyses how this shift challenges and redefines the boundaries of translation studies. The essay specifically underscores the interdisciplinary nature of the concept of cultural translation, showcasing its possible role as a nexus among diverse academic fields such as linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. It advocates that cultural translation can serve as a crucial tool not only for deciphering intricate intercultural dynamics and exchanges but also for exporting theories and insights from translation studies to other disciplines. In this way, cultural translation emerges as a liminal interdisciplinary portal, which reciprocally broadens and amplifies the scope and impact of translation studies. That is, while the conceptual robustness of cultural translation enriches the field of translation studies, the insights and theories nurtured within this field can be propagated to adjacent disciplines via the intermediary of cultural translation.

Keywords: Translation Studies; conceptualisation of translation; cultural translation; interdisciplinarity

What is translation? It is not as easy a question as it seems.

With the development of translation studies over the past fifty years, it is now undisputed, as Theo Hermans points out, that "translation is a complex thing and that a comprehensive and clear-cut view of it is hard to obtain" (Hermans 2013: 75). Here, I do not intend to delve into the intricate and potentially endless discussions and debates about what translation is or should be. Instead, let us commence with the metaphorical conceptualisation of translation.

Traditionally, translation is mostly viewed and understood from a formalist-linguistic perspective. To translate is to convey meaning from one language to another, and try to keep the original meaning intact as much as possible in the translated language. For example, Eugene Nida and Charles Taber portray

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the process of translation as the translator walking around the bank of a river trying to find the perfect way and spot to cross over (Guldin 2016: 50). The spatial metaphor they used illustrates their conceptualisation of translation as pursuing equivalence. It implies that the process of carrying across meaning usually features a relatively short and straightforward journey, such as crossing a river, building a bridge over a river, or transmitting through a conduit. It underlines the steadiness of the act by keeping the source away from the fluidity of the river. So, the task of the translator is to keep the meaning intact from the hazardous water and carry it to the other side. Simply put, translation is a task and a skill in which finding the equivalence between source and target is paramount.

Since the 1980s, broader understandings of translation have started to gain prominence. In the field of translation studies, the emphasis has transitioned, reflecting the epistemological evolution within the humanities from a search for universal truths to recognising the observer's impact – a shift from positivism to post-positivism. Rather than strictly adhering to a binary concept of equivalence between the source text and the target text, scholars started to delve into the intricate historical, cultural, and political backgrounds influencing both sides of the translation process (Marinetti 2011: 26). This paradigm/epistemology shift and extension is usually termed as the culture turn or the cultural approach, "directing attention away from the linguistic conception of translation as abstract correspondence between texts to what happens in translation" (Robinson 1991: 129). Scholars began to focus less on the approach of translation as mimicking, and more on the nature of translation as rewriting and creating. Accordingly, the idea of translation as a secondary, equivalence-based task has given way to a more evolved understanding of it as a relatively autonomous and creatively crafted process. And the binary river crossing/conduit metaphor of translation has thus been remade, giving rise to many new conceptualisations that foreground various aspects of translation as both process and product in more nuanced ways. For example, included among these approaches to conceptualising translation are the prototype theory and the model of cluster concepts, which portray translation not as something clear-cut, but rather as a spectrum.

The prototype theory proposes that translation can be a conceptual thinking that containes a wide spectrum of perceptions and practices with "graded membership" and "fuzzy boundaries": some translations are more prototypical and central, while some are more borderline and peripheral (Hermans 2013: 75). The basic assumption of this theory is that generally when people use the word translation, most of them would share an idealised cognitive conceptual model as the prototype to be tested against in every usage

(ibid.). Approaching translation through a relationship of approximation, the theory shakes off stable shackles and opens up to the diversity of translation in various shapes. That is, in addition to the type of translation that people would immediately accept as translation (such as interlingual translation), it also recognises those close to the prototype as translation (such as intralingual translation and intersemiotic translation). It seems to be a rather eclectic as well as applicable solution between the counterpoints of recognising only "translation proper" in Roman Jakobson's sense (Jakobson 2013: 231–232) and proposing that "every language act is a translation" (Steiner 2004: 1). However, the dichotomy of centre and periphery as a framework implies a presupposed superiority of interlingual translation as prototypical or most proper, in addition to which it implies that other types of translation are less prototypical and less proper. It is, substantially, a binary framework that entails hierarchy and carries the risk of building on reductionism and essentialism. It may bring neglectful marginalisation of translations (such as the intersemiotic translation of sign language and the intralingual translation between different dialects) that are considered less proper, or even inferior. In order to explore and explain a possible way to counter such risk, I would like to take a little digression to the heuristic "pushing hands" (*Tuishou* 推手) conceptual model developed by Martha Cheung from Chinese martial arts to approach translation history. Pushing hands is a non-violent martial art practice that is part of taijiquan involving two people. It teaches practitioners not to fight force with force but to yield to it so that they can neutralise and redirect the force (Cheung 2016). More specifically, Cheung illustrates pushing hands as a cooperative exercise, redirecting the opposing partner's strength and co-opting it to one's advantage (ibid.). The practice has an intellectual appeal that encourages reconsideration in situations of opposition. Instead of complete rejection, we can try to incorporate and redirect an opposing argument to our own advantage. With this in mind, let us go back to the situation of the prototype theory. Once the problematic centre–periphery dichotomy is realised as an opposing force, we can try to redirect it without abandoning the applicable eclectic view on translation. Although the "graded membership" of prototype theory can be problematic as it indicates the prescribed superiority of interlingual translation, it also reflects how interlingual translation has a predominant position in both translation practice and research. So, instead of upholding the "graded membership" of different types of translation, we can recognise the centre–periphery situation without prioritising translation proper or downgrading other types of translation as less proper, such as intralingual translation, audiovisual translation, sign language interpretation, and various kinds of translation in a metaphorical sense. In order to dismantle the centre-periphery

relationship, we can try to graft this recognition, originated from prototype theory, onto the cluster concept model.

The cluster concept model comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" and was developed by Maria Tymoczko (2006) to accommodate a wide range of ideas about translation, especially conceptions of translation from non-Western traditions. Wittgenstein suggests that concepts can be understood through partial and different types of similarity across a wide spectrum of adjacent exemplars (Hermans 2013). Here, it is possible to incorporate the thinking of translation as a cluster concept in order to include the types of translation that are considered less proper according to prototype theory, and to suggest that they deserve no less scholarly attention than the so-called prototype. In the cluster concept of translation, instead of clear-cut definitions or postulates, meanings of different types of translation are established through linked similarities, analogies, overlaps and connections, while at the same time maintaining their respective specific contexts. The cluster concept replaces "graded membership" with "linked similarities" and keeps the eclectic view of translation as containing a wide spectrum of perceptions and practices. That is to say, in contrast to trying to identify the most prototypical or representative traits of translation, regarding translation as a cluster concept relies on the linkages established through the resemblances of different phenomena (Hermans 2013). Instead of a relationship of approximation that entails a centre position, translation as a cluster concept is built on a relationship of juxtaposition. Thus, the hierarchy of centre and periphery is dismantled, and translation is recognised as decentred and rhizome-like, moving from case to case and, in the process, accommodating divergent and even incommensurable instances and practices. It engages in close, localised observation and puts the onus on the observer to demonstrate linkages with related phenomena elsewhere (Hermans 2013: 84).

The combination of the prototype theory and the model of a cluster concept provides a diversely open, flexible and non-reductive way to consider translation. It recognises the significance and substantial position of interlingual translation, but does not uphold it as a presupposed and privileged position within translation studies. Meanwhile, it regards various types of translation as rhizome-like and polyphonic with partial resemblances as well as their own contexts and specificity. More importantly, it acknowledges and allows for the metaphorical connotations and usages of translation within the field of translation studies. This perspective opens up fertile ground for interdisciplinary research and development. And within this expanded framework, the concept of "cultural translation" emerges as a particularly rich area of interdisciplinarity embodying the metaphorical use of translation by

transcending mere linguistic transfer to encompass the broader dynamics of cultural exchange and interpretation.

The term cultural translation encompasses a diverse yet fragmented assortment of factors. However, two aspects of the term are clear: firstly, across various disciplines, there is no consensus on a precise definition or application of the term; secondly, despite this ambiguity, the notion of "translation" within this context is consistently employed metaphorically, rather than referring to literal practices. By tracing the historical and disciplinary development of cultural translation, we can identify that there are basically two far-reaching, distinct and, sometimes, interwoven models: Tala Asad's study from an anthropological perspective, and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial and cultural studies perspective (See Asad 1986; Bhabha 1990, 1994; Conway 2012; Pym 2014; Maitland 2017; Wu 2021). In both models, translation is metaphorically applied to describe non-linguistic cultural interactions. Both models also critically assess how understanding of cultures that are considered foreign is formed. Asad's model advocates that ethnographers write about other cultures for their native audience in a reflexive, dialogical, and post-positivist manner, consciously avoiding the Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism that is influenced by institutional power. Bhabha's approach interprets translation as a strategic tool for ethnic minorities and cultural critics to negotiate and challenge postcolonial conditions. Both models, drawing on Walter Benjamin's thoughts, suggest different applications: Asad focuses on representing foreign cultures authentically without cultural assimilation, while Bhabha envisions cultural translators using foreign elements to challenge and redefine the norms of dominant cultures (Wu 2021: 411). These two influential models have enlightened and elicited quite a number of works based on the concept and application of cultural translation across the disciplinary spectrum. Especially within the field of translation studies, the conceptualisations and applications of the term are fervently discussed and debated.

In 2009, the journal *Translation Studies* published an interdisciplinary forum hosted and introduced by Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny entitled *Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses*. The Forum consists of three parts, including one introduction and eleven responses, appearing in three issues of the journal from 2009 to 2010 (vol. 2.2, vol. 3.1, vol. 3.3). Scholars from various fields are invited to discuss the term cultural translation. And being a journal entitled *Translation Studies*, quite a number of scholars frequently working in the field of translation studies were also invited to contribute, including Andrew Chesterman, Maria Tymoczko, Ovidi Carbonell Cortés, Sherry Simon, Michael Cronin, Lieven D'hulst and Robert J. C. Young; while the two initiators of the discussion, Buden and Nowotny,

both have a background in cultural and political theories. Their introduction presents a perspective of Bhabha's cultural translation through analysis of how migrants who moved to Germany are compelled into culturally framed constructions to pass the German citizenship test. In the introductory editorial note, the editors propose that it is the Forum's intention to delineate the controversy around the term cultural translation, and to "explore and evaluate the potential of the concept both for translation studies and for its neighbouring disciplines" (Buden and Nowotny 2009: 196), which is honourable and grand. However, their essay, which covers the phenomenon from the foreignising strategy for interlingual translation developed by the German Romantics as a patriotic commitment, to the foreignising translation developed by Benjamin and Bhabha, to Jakobson's perspective on language and translation, does not fully define the term or explain, in any concrete way, what they refer to as cultural translation. They also pass over how Bhabha's concept of cultural translation is by no means a one-way process but is bilateral and dialectical. In addition, their case, of migrants being compelled to fit into certain cultural frames set by the citizenship test, is, for one thing, a bit too absolute to describe any factual situation, as Young points out in his later response when he says that migrants usually just learn the right answers to pass the test, which is not too different from any student taking a test at school (Young 2010: 357). Apart from anything else, remembering the right answers does not mean or prove that they are being "translated" into the dominant cultural frames by the institutionalised citizenship text (ibid.). If anything, it is the migrants who translate themselves to survive. Similarly, Pratt in her response also says that, after careful comparison and deduction, translation might not be the best metaphor for such social and political situations (Pratt 2010: 95–96). Furthermore, in the "Responses", there are scholars in Translation Studies who hold a more proprietorial attitude to the enlarging usages of textual translation as metaphors for non-textual cultural phenomena. Chesterman sees such metaphorical extension as "a down-side" to the concept of translation, risking diluting it into nothing (Chesterman 2010: 103). Tymoczko argues even more rigorously that, for scholars working on issues resulting from cultural displacement and interaction, sorting out their theoretical problems using metalevel theories "developed by translation studies is all wishful thinking in the extreme" (Tymoczko 2010: 110). Yet, the most cutting critique comes from Anthony Pym, who refused to write a response for Buden and Nowotny's Introduction. In his article, posted online, "On Empiricism and Bad Philosophy in Translation Studies", Pym bluntly says, "to be honest, I had no idea what the text was about" (Pym 2010: 6). He points out that the authors not only fail to break down cultural translation as either product or process, more disturbingly,

they cut the concept of translation into "a sharp ideological divide between good and bad" (ibid.: 7).

Obviously, the Forum does not resolve the problematic issues of cultural translation. The term remains fractured, and a polarised contestation has been raised. Some think it is a promising concept to study the "dynamic processes of interaction among different cultures that appear to characterize our contemporary era" (Young 2010: 156); some prefer other metaphors over translation for issues related to displacement, migration and diaspora (Pratt 2010); some insist it's inappropriate to take from theories based on translation proper to look into the metaphorical use of translation (Tymoczko 2009: 110). However, with an optimistic point of view, the Forum drew together a collection of different voices and stimulated ongoing discussions on the concept at an interdisciplinary level.

Since then, the term has gained increasing attention, along with both interdisciplinary expectations and disciplinary defence against extended use of "translation", particularly in translation studies. A skimming of the term in several translation studies textbooks could provide some evidence. The 1st edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of translation studies*, published in 1998, did not mention cultural translation in any way. Later, in 2009, the 2nd edition of the *Encyclopedia* included an entry entitled "cultural translation", written by Kate Sturge; another decade later in the newest 3rd edition, published in 2020, an updated entry for cultural translation, written by Kyle Conway, was included. Conway also wrote the entry for cultural translation in the *Handbook of Translation Studies* (Vol. 3) published by John Benjamins in 2012. And in the *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Culture* published in 2018, both David Katan's chapter "Defining Culture, Defining Translation" and Sherry Simon's Chapter "Space" presented cultural translation as a crucial concept and discussed related issues. In addition, we need to note that some translation scholars use the term cultural translation in a more literal sense to refer to the cultural elements in translation proper, while some use it as a synonym for the cultural approach or the cultural turn in translation studies. For example, in the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* published in 1997, "cultural translation" is referred to as "any translation which is sensitive to cultural as well as linguistic factors" and is conflated with both the cultural approach in translation studies and Nida's dynamic equivalence (Shuttleworth and Cowie 1997: 35–36). In *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*, Susan Bassnett (2011) mentions that the cultural turn in translation studies could also be put under the title of cultural translation in broader consideration. However, in a more precise and specific way and for the purposes and limits of the current research, neither

Nida's dynamic equivalence nor the conceptual complexity of the cultural turn will be considered under the name of cultural translation.

As illustrated above, despite the ongoing active discussions and debates among scholars from various disciplines, the term cultural translation in a sea of literature remains a "discrete concept" (Maitland 2017: 14), abstract and contested, seemingly self-evident yet elusive. Without careful dissection, the term could be easily filled with promise and ambiguity, eventually too thick to be put into empirical practice. In many, cases the term cultural translation is used self-evidently with no concrete example. Citations from Asad or Bhabha can be spotted frequently taken out of context without further theoretical explanation. It is as Pratt points out in the *Translation Studies* Forum:

> In the growing literature on cultural translation, the dearth of examples is a symptom that often nags…. When specific examples are introduced, they are often cited as self-evident instances of a self-evident practice called cultural translation, not analyzed so as to demonstrate how that concept actually works, what kind of understanding it enables, what it misses or obscures. (Pratt 2009: 94)

Subsequently, when there is a discussion or debate on the term, it is very likely that people do not actually mean the same thing, which majorly contributes to the overly polarised contestation of the term. Some regard it as the "alchemy" for issues related to cultural encounters, while some see it as a hazard to translation studies (Conway 2020: 129). Harish Trivedi states: "instead of a cultural turn in Translation Studies, we have on our hands a beast of similar name but very different fur and fibre – something called Cultural Translation" (Trivedi 2007: 282). In defence of the newly developed discipline of translation studies, Trivedi claims that if the use of cultural translation is not stopped, the old-fashioned literary translation would "wither away"; translation proper would be colonised by the postcolonial and assimilated in one monolingual and universal culture (ibid.: 286). So, should we just abandon the term for good and confine all usages of translation to "translation proper"? Of course not!

It took a long time for the phenomena of translation to be recognised as an independent discipline. From the image of the *belle infidèle* to that of the *traduttore/traditore*, the product and process of translation have a long history as second rate and inferior to the original. And before the official advent of translation studies in the 1970s, research on textual and interlingual translations usually perch on the margins of linguistics or literary studies. So, it is justifiable that some scholars working in translation studies would be defensive of the disciplinary borders and have a problem with an extended and fuzzier concept

of translation which has never stopped being debated. And it should be admitted that if we use the word translation wherever exchanges or transactions happen, there would be a great risk of diluting the term: it means nothing when it means everything. However, the solution by no means keeps away from any metaphorical sense of translation, and neither does it confine theories of textual translation behind artificial disciplinary walls. Otherwise accordingly, the popular pairing of "foreignisation and domestication" would be banned from analysing non-textual cultural occasions; and quite a number of theories that we have borrowed from other disciplines to look into the so-called translation proper would be condemned as impermissible. As Michaela Wolf rebuts, "banning a metaphorical variant of the translation notion – i.e., what has been called 'cultural translation' – from the field of research of Translation Studies would ultimately mean rejecting any sort of interdisciplinary work in this respect" (Wolf 2009: 77–78). Vulnerability of the conservative critique over cultural translation is not difficult to spot. For one thing, cultural and social phenomena do not choose to exist as pre-packaged according to any presupposed academic borders; for another, looking back at intellectual history around the world, the propelling power of travelling concepts and appropriated metaphors could never be overlooked, on which the discipline of Translation Studies itself is built. As Young points out, those who wish to shut the stable door on the concept of translation and Translation Studies are "several centuries late" (Young 2010: 385). In the newest 3rd edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies,* Gabriela Saldanha and Mona Baker point out in the "Introduction" that both "interdisciplinarity" and "transdisciplinarity" are important trends that increasingly shape the development of the discipline (Saldanha and Baker 2020: xxv). And interdisciplinarity includes not only importing but exporting as well, which would be reciprocal for both sides. As Mary Snell-Hornby rightly concludes, "[the] highest stage of development is reciprocal interdisciplinarity, which brings gain for both sides: two or more disciplines cooperate on equal terms, jointly developing methods and concepts, resulting in mutual enrichment" (Snell-Hornby 2006: 72). Accordingly, exporting theories and insights from Translation Studies would not challenge the independent position of the discipline, but would, instead, consolidate itself as an interdisciplinary field. In 2019, the journal *The Translator* published a thematic cluster called *The Outward Turn*, hosted by Susan Bassnett and David Johnston, proposing not a new direction for the discipline but expansions outwards beyond disciplinary boundaries. Now, with nearly half a century's endeavour since the establishment of Translation Studies, it is high time for scholars within the discipline, as experts of translation, to step into the "third space" of interdisciplinarity and prove "its appeal to contemporary thought and social action" (Simon 2009: 210).

Another recent call for an expansion of the field comes from Edwin Gentzler, who proposes that translation be perceived as the precondition and "always on-going process of every communication", and that we are entering a time of "post-Translation Studies" (Gentzler 2017: 5). Simply put, returning to the term cultural translation, with detailed elaboration we can learn from it in order to develop translation studies, and at the same time we can develop the concept with insights gained from studies on interlingual translation and attention to language difference. As Cornelia Zwischenberger suggests, in her contribution to "The Outward Turn" issue, translation studies "has the instruments needed to move the concept of 'cultural translation' away from a purely metaphorical level of understanding" (Zwischenberger 2019: 262). A few scholars have developed the concept of cultural translation in two directions: learning from, and contributing to, the concept of cultural translation. Pym, though, criticises Buden and Nowotny's application of the term, stating that with better clarification the term provides a positive paradigm that could enlighten our ways of thinking beyond the binary of stable source and target: "It introduces a human dimension and sees translation from the perspective of the (figurative) translator; … its focus on hybridity undoes many of the binary oppositions marking previous translation theory; it relates translation to the demographical movements that are changing the shape of our cultures." (Pym 2014: 154)

Rainer Guldin suggests that, from the perspective of the spatial metaphor of translation, the concept of cultural translation could help us think of translation not as a linear relationship from departure to arrival, but "an open-ended process that is never final and never total" (Guldin 2016: 58). Developing the term with insights gained from translation studies and translational thinking, Sarah Maitland, in her most recent book *What is Cultural Translation?*, proposes integrating the specific actions of the "interlingual translator" into the analytical process of cultural translation (Maitland 2017: 2). Instead of following Asad or Bhabha, Maitland intends to broaden the epistemological horizon and draws on continental philosophy, particularly critical hermeneutics developed by Paul Ricoeur. She also believes that translation thinking from interlingual translation holds the potential to enhance our understanding of cross-cultural situations such as globalisation and the immigration crisis (ibid.). Building on the analogy between the model of interlingual translation and hermeneutic interpretation, Maitland (2017: 28–29) develops her own concept of cultural translation "as traceable presence of hermeneutic gestures of reading and writing", following five different states in Ricoeur's hermeneutic procedures – interpretation, distanciation, incorporation, transformation and emancipation. However, in the ending of the book, Maitland concludes,

from the hermeneutic perspective, that "all translation is cultural translation" (ibid.: 160), which sort of complicates the relationship between interlingual translation and cultural translation. Indeed, all translation is cultural at some level, but with the intention of defining and dissecting the terminology of cultural translation it is better to avoid such a proclamation, which is broad and encompassing, although this might be just the essence of hermeneutics, i.e. the omnipresence of translation. It is as Maitland states at the very end, we must "translate ourselves" to locate ourselves in the world (ibid.: 161).

Now, with the heuristic insights from above, let us take another look at Trivedi's criticism from a different angle, although there is not much doubt that Trivedi is relatively too radical on the use of postcolonial criticism to defend the disciplinary territory of translation studies. If we jump out of the opposed argument of "to use or not to use" translation in metaphorical senses and try to take advantage of the pushing hands thinking paradigm mentioned earlier, Trivedi's excessive alarm about ending up with an Anglicised hegemonic and monolithic world could be viewed as a reminder that translation practices marking language differences in cultural translation also deserve academic attention. Otherwise, it would be easy to fall into the trap of assuming language transparency linguistic and cultural borders. To borrow Trivedi's words, instead of dislodging "cultural translation" as "non-translation" (Trivedi 2007: 286), we could try to shed light on the linguistic dimension of cultural translation, especially in the analysis of the non-fictional texts pertaining to cross-cultural communication (such as international news and travel writing in particular), where "source texts", in terms of interlingual translation, do exist. In this way, cultural translation becomes a liminal portal for importing and exporting that constantly extends the borders of translation studies in a reciprocal way.

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