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The Intercultural Question and the Interpreting Professions

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Tourism Across Languages and Cultures: Accessibility Through Translation

Mirella Agorni

Abstract

The language of tourism has been defined as a specialised kind of discourse, and this is especially clear in the context of cross-cultural communication. This article will investigate the ways in which translators need to mediate tourist texts in order to achieve successful communication. The main challenge is represented by the so-called cultural specific elements, that is the cultural traits which characterise destinations from a specific historical, geographic, and social point of view.

The purpose of tourism is to negotiate the encounter with the Other, and in doing so identities have to be mediated and often re-fashioned. Experts in the field of tourism set themselves the task of translating the foreign into discourse, so as to produce a sense of otherness that can be recognized as different from the familiar. But the only way to make "difference" recognizable to a home/target culture is to exploit domestic material and techniques to build the foreign into discourse. Hence, those traits of tourist destinations potentially perceived as excessively "exotic" are often rewritten or mediated, so as to create familiar and agreeable images for a readership that is made up of tourists.

The object of this article is to analyse what happens when tourism-fashioned identities are transported across linguistic and cultural borders. I shall work on tourist discourse in a perspective of translation intended as a cross-cultural practice, highlighting degrees of mediation of linguistic and textual features, and culture-specific elements.

1. The Language of Tourism

The language of tourism as a specialized type of discourse has been analysed from a number of linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives, especially in Italy, where works by a large number of scholars have been produced in the last decade or so (e.g. Agorni 2012a, Calvi 2000, Cappelli 2006, Castello 2002, Denti 2012, Francesconi 2014, Fodde 2012, Gotti 2006, Maci 2013, Manca 2004, Nigro 2006). This type of discourse is characterised by an extreme variety in terms of fields of professional application, ranging from tourist and information agencies, tour operators, accommodation providers, to restaurants, and not to mention the publishing sector, which produces guidebooks and specialised literature (cfr. Agorni, 2012c: 3-4).

In order to account for such a distinctive variety, Calvi (2000: 17) has identified two essential components of this discourse variety: firstly a heterogeneous thematic component, corresponding to the numerous domains constituting the field of tourism (such as geography, economics, marketing, history, psychology, etc.), and, secondly, a communicative component strictly related to the context of situation. The latter is produced by means of a limited range of textual macro-functions, usually of an informative or persuasive nature, or a mixture of both. However, given the fact that the thematic components of this type of discourse are extremely diverse, scholars generally agree that the specificity of the language of tourism is to be found at communicative level, and can be visualized in terms of specific communicative strategies, condensed into three principal practices (Agorni, 2012 a: 11-12):

1. Strategies meant to produce functional texts by addressing the specific needs and expectations of their receivers (for example, involvement strategies, use of persuasive techniques, strategies of reader inclusion, etc.).
2. Selection of specific genres (such as the guidebook, brochure or flier), characterised by the appearance of a strong persuasive function in a text type which is predominantly informative or descriptive.
3. A strong presence of culture-specific elements, which metonymically represent foreign destinations.

As a consequence, tourist communication has developed a language capable of coping with the needs of the diverse components/constituents of this field. But this raises a fundamental question: who should the thematic components of tourism discourse be made accessible to? The most obvious answer is “tourists”.

Definitions of the tourist identity are plentiful both in social and cultural analyses of tourist phenomena. Tourism represents a prominent community of practice, yet the large dimension and extreme variety characterising this field risk undermining a coherent definition of its specificity. Tourist phenomena take shape in a specific but rather heterogeneous community of practice, a large and inclusive cluster, comprising both professionals in the tourist industry and ordinary tourists.

Yet, the real problem is not identifying tourists in terms of the activity they all practice, that is tourism, but rather establishing their specialised or "epistemic" knowledge. The concept of identity which will be employed in this paper is to be understood as social and situational, made up of the limited number of subject positions available in specific communicative situations (cfr. Agorni, 2012b: 6). Speakers adopt such positions on the basis of their familiarity, or "knowledge", of specific situations. In fact, the concept of "knowledge" has been used to lay the foundations for specific-domain communities, as Riley has demonstrated by developing the notion of *epistemic communities*, that is, knowledge-based social groups (2002: 57, author's emphasis). Riley points out that specialised knowledge is normally derived from everyday knowledge, given that there is no difference between the two categories from a cognitive point of view. However, if there is no difference in kind, there is a difference in terms of degree, because members of a specialised community will display a more extensive knowledge of their objects of expertise than the general public.

This does not seem to apply to the field of tourism, though, as it is difficult to speak about tourists having a more extensive knowledge of their domain of expertise than ordinary people. It goes without saying that it is difficult to determine the degree of knowledge and expertise necessary for any person to be classified as a tourist, as virtually anybody can be defined as such at any stage of life, regardless of their social or economic situation, or degree of literacy and knowledge.

2. The Accessibility of CSIs

Yet, the concept of "knowledge" and the difficulty relating it to the tourist's experience is strictly linked to the notion at the basis of this paper, that is accessibility. This notion cuts across a multitude of different aspects in the field of tourism and raises the question of what is to be made accessible when we talk about tourist experiences across languages and cultures. The latter elements, i.e. languages and cultures, are central ingredients of the tourist experience, and the complex ways in which they are combined and shaped into characteristic traits of specific cultures lie at the core of research in Translation Studies. A number of approaches have been developed to address this subject, from sophisticated theories like Venuti's minoritizing translation (1998), to the more practical approaches to be used in everyday translation teaching, focusing on the so-called "cultural words" (Newmark 1988), "cultural-specific concepts or items" (Baker 1992, Franco-Aixelà 1996), "realia" (Florin 1993), "culturemes" (Nord 1997; Katan 2009), "culture-bumps" (Leppihalme 1997), and "extralinguistic cultural references" (Pedersen 2011).

Culture-specific items, or CSIs, have been defined by Franco Aixelà as "those textually actualised items whose functions and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text." (1996: 58). This definition is particularly interesting as it takes into account not only the CSIs themselves, but also the function they play as specific target language (henceforward TL) textual components, and the way in which they may be perceived and accessed by TL readers. In fact, translation scholars have debated the topics related to the translation of CSIs for years, devising a variety of different strategies.

One of the most prescriptive and yet comprehensive approaches was developed by Newmark, who describes twelve different "translation procedures" to deal with cultural words, namely (1988: 103):

1. Transference
2. Cultural equivalent
3. Neutralisation (i.e. functional or descriptive equivalent)
4. Literal translation
5. Label
6. Naturalisation
7. Componential analysis
8. Deletion
9. Couplet
10. Accepted standard translation
11. Paraphrase, gloss, notes, etc.
12. Classifier

Another extremely popular approach, particularly useful in translators' training, it that of Baker (1992), who distinguishes eight different approaches to the translation of culture-specific concepts:

1. Translation by a more general word
2. Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word
3. Cultural substitution
4. Use of a loan word or loan word plus explanation
5. Paraphrase using related words
6. Paraphrase using unrelated words
7. Omission
8. Illustration

Harvey (2000) offers four major strategies for dealing with culture-bound terms, and they are:

1. Functional equivalence
2. Formal equivalence (i.e., word for word translation)
3. Transcription or borrowing (that is, reproducing or transliterating the original) – to be used alone or followed by an explanation
4. Descriptive translation by means of generic terms

Franco Aixelà's strategies, or techniques, are organized in a sequence, going from a lesser to a greater degree of intercultural manipulation, and further distinguished into two major groups, defined as conservative or substitutive:

1. conservation techniques: repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic (non-cultural) translation, extratextual and intratextual gloss
2. substitution techniques: synonymy, limited universalisation, absolute universalisation, naturalisation, deletion and autonomous creation

Such detailed lists and classifications do not only demonstrate the complexity of the approaches to be employed for translating CSIs, but also the fact that, as Franco Aixelà has made clear, they can be arranged on a scale whose extremities seem to be represented by Venuti's well-known domesticating and foreignizing poles (Venuti 1995). As Ramière has put it, "The model is therefore clearly based on a polarisation with each translation procedure tending towards one pole or the other, thus presenting Self and Other as mutually exclusive" (2006: 156). Although she was not specifically addressing the issue of cultural transfer in relation to tourism discourse, this comment appears to be extremely appropriate to describe the approaches to translating CSIs in the field of tourism.

The Self vs. Other dichotomy plays a fundamental role also in Dann's (1996) seminal work on the language of tourism, especially when he delineates a series of polarisations, such as familiar vs. new, tourist vs. native, or the way in which an imaginary past is contrasted with a monotonous present. Yet, he makes clear that these extremes do not eliminate each other: rather, they seem to create a tension which can neither be resolved in favour of open, foreignizing strategies of translation, nor by using domesticating ones. In the first case, translators would run the risk of losing the tourist, who may feel unable to decode cultural difference and finally decide not to cooperate from a communicative point of view – and eventually reject the tourist offer. In the second case, however, domesticating strategies reduce cultural difference, by substituting it with familiar images. The risk is that of exchanging the new for the familiar, and of offering experiences that undermine the recreational drive, which is crucial for the tourist experience. Faced with unexciting tourist proposals, tourists may decide to stay at home.

The task of the translator, therefore, is that of finding a balance between the need to provide both accessible and appealing contents; as a consequence, a variety of strategies will have to be used, in order to discerningly enhance or reduce cultural difference, according to specific situations (Agorni 2012b: 6). Scholars such as Kelly (1997, 2000) have argued that tourism text translators must help readers contextualise information which may be implicit in the original source text (henceforward ST), but incomprehensible for the TL readers. On the other hand, however, translators should control their interpretive interventions so as not to provide an excessive amount of information, which could be too heavy to be processed by target readers. To quote Kelly herself, readers need "information to be dosed […] to prevent an overload which could lead to a breakdown in communication" (1997:35).

3. Tourism Discourse Translation as Cultural Mediation

Translator mediation can be visualized as a fine line, a way in between clear-cut dichotomies. As has been argued elsewhere (Agorni 2012b, and 2012c) "tourism discourse" is itself a form of "cultural mediation", because it "translates" cultural values by promoting the identity of specific destinations, together with their communities. Yet, this seems to complicate the question posed in the first section of this paper, i.e. what has to be made accessible across languages and cultures? Arguably, a provisional answer to this question could be cultural difference, a type of difference which is always inscribed within tourism discourse itself. The problem is that there seems to be no straight answer to the question about accessibility across languages and cultures. In fact, the question implies some kind of material transfer of meaning in an essentialist sense, as if it could exist before and outside language. In such a perspective, translation can only be envisaged as a successful meaning retrieval between languages.

However, I believe that this is a limited view of the kind of mediation that is particularly evident in the translation of tourism discourse. In fact, this type of translation exposes the irreducible nature of cultural difference, which nevertheless does not imply its untranslatability. It is rather the other way round: cultural difference lies at the core of the very act of translation, as it enables meaning to spread and circulate.

In order to confine my context of application to the practice of translating tourism discourse, I will not appeal to any complex deconstructionist theory, but I will rather refer to one of the most widely known linguistic theories, that of Jakobson. Importantly, he put translation at the centre of any act of signification when he wrote that "the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign" (1971: 261). Jakobson appears to go beyond the perspective of a material, essentialist transfer of meaning as if languages were some sort of symmetrical systems because he gives centrality to the very act of dissemination of meaning, which is the distinctive trait of translation. In his view, translation is a dynamic process that makes meaning circulate - beyond linguistic, social and cultural borders. Bakhtin seems to reinforce Jakobson's argument when he writes: "the word […] always wants to be *heard*, always seeks responsive understanding, and does not stop at *immediate* understanding but presses on further and further (indefinitely)" (2006: 127, author's emphasis). Here the "word" stands for a metonymic representation of the act of translation itself, with its emphasis on circulation and transmission as meaning-creating processes. In this perspective translation does not merely have a reproductive function, but it is rather placed at the core of meaning-making strategies.

This theoretical approach appears to be particularly fruitful for the mediation of tourism discourse, as the impossibility to achieve a perfect transfer of sense, or equivalence - especially apparent in the translation of CSIs - paradoxically gives rise to those cultural dynamics promoting the circulation of meaning. Mimetic strategies of literal reproduction do not work in this type of translation, because languages and cultures are not symmetrical systems, and this is the reason why techniques such as transcriptions and borrowings that are not complemented with either explanatory information or smooth adaptations to the TL system, work only to a limited extent in the translation of tourist texts. My point here is that making cultural notions accessible to a foreign audience does not mean simply "transferring" them, but rather, "mediating" them through an approximate process of negotiation of meaning. This process is productive, that is meaning-creative, precisely because it is approximate: it opens up new possibilities of signification and cross-cultural meaning-making. It is ironically a lack of correspondence that keeps the process of signification alive, and this is particularly clear in any form of cultural translation.

Accessibility can be interpreted and explained as a communicative process in which culturally-loaded meanings are perpetually exchanged and circulated. This could in fact be the best answer to the central question of this paper, i.e. what has to be made accessible across languages and cultures. Transmission here is not meant to be seen as an end in itself, but, rather, as a dynamic process of meaning-creation.

4. Accessibility and Mediation in the Field of Tourism: From Theory to Practice

In this section the notion of translation as a meaning-making process will be applied to the practice of translating tourism discourse. I would like to present an extract taken from a translation by an Italian Masters in Translation student. I will analyse an extract taken from an article published in the British magazine *Condè Nast Traveller* (December 2009), under the title "Munching in Munich" (see also Agorni 2011: 447-450). The magazine is generally known to be one of the most popular periodicals for luxury travel, its readers belonging to the upper-scale of the tourist industry. The topic of the article is a contrast between traditional food and new, experimental cuisine in Munich. The most interesting aspect of this article, however, is given by the fact that there are two different cultural perspectives simultaneously at work, providing two types of mediation: the first is that of the ST author, who is a British journalist describing his experience with German food and tradition for a British/international audience, whilst the second, obviously, belongs to the Italian translator, whose task is made more complex by her being aware of the earlier mediation of the ST.

This type of translation necessarily requires a high degree of cultural awareness. The student selected the article herself and seemed to be aware of the complexity of her task, the first instance being the title: "Munching in Munich", which becomes "Monac….quolina in bocca", literally a play on words exploiting the sounds of the Italian name for Munich, e.g. *Monaco* and the word *acquolina*, an expression for mouth-watering. The promotional component of the travel article genre is fundamental and this is the reason at the basis of the widespread use of humour and wordplay, strategies that are not so common in other tourism sub-genres. In the case of the title, the translator has substituted the alliterative sequence of the ST with a pun, achieving a double effect: it introduces the subject of the article, that is cuisine, and it also produces a humorous surprise for the reader.

I shall only examine the two short extracts reproduced below. Before going ahead with the analysis, it is necessary to point out that, although the text has been mediated at different linguistic and cultural levels, I shall concentrate only on the semantic aspects of this translation here.

ST

The dumplings in Bavaria are bigger than anywhere else in Germany. In the Rhineland the *Semmelknodeln* (made with stale morning rolls) are the size of billiard balls. The ones in Zum Franziskaner in Munich, by contrast, are so large you could play petanque with them. Zum Franziskaner is one of the city's better traditional places to eat in. Hop wreaths and horse furniture adorn the walls, and the staff wears dirndls and collarless white smocks.

TT

I canederli bavaresi sono i più grandi di tutta la Germania: talmente grandi che, se i *Semmelknodeln* della Renania, preparati tritando le *Semmel*, tipiche pagnottelle bianche, hanno le dimensioni di una palla da biliardo, con quelli del Zum Franziskaner di Monaco si può giocare a bocce. Il Zum

Franziskaner è uno dei migliori ristoranti di cucina tipica di tutta la città: il locale è arredato con ghirlande di luppolo e mobili in stile equestre, e i camerieri indossano abiti tradizionali: *Dirndl* per le Kellnerine, camiciotti bianchi senza colletto per i loro colleghi uomini.

The subject of the ST article is food and cuisine, a challenging topic for translators because of the fundamental diversity existing among national culinary traditions. Yet this theme is used very often to produce an exotic flavour in tourist texts, as Dann has demonstrated in the section dedicated to "gastrolingo": a specific micro-linguistic variety used in the tourism field to describe culinary traditions (1996: 235). As pointed out elsewhere (Agorni 2011: 449), two insights are particularly useful in Dann's analysis: the tendency to use foreign words when speaking about food following the "languaging" communicative strategy, and his interpretation of the emphasis on genuine food as a distinctive trait of the search for authenticity, which characterises the tourist drive.

There are two examples of "languaging" strategy in the extract analysed. In the first case, the Italian translation student highlights the meaning of *Semmelknodeln* by repeating and glossing the first component of the compound, the word *Semmel*. The result is an explicitation of the ST expression, which is rendered as "tipiche pagnottelle bianche", traditional small white loaves. In the second instance of "languaging", however, the degree of mediation is even higher. The translator deliberately intervenes to draw attention to the waiters' traditional costumes. Whereas the ST lays no emphasis on this element (except for the insertion of the word "dirndls", inflected for the plural, but left unexplained), the Italian translator explains that *Dirndl* are traditional costumes, and highlights the word in italics adopting the German spelling. Moreover, she adds an extra exotic flavour by inserting a new German loan word, that is "Kellnerine", an invented word, made up of the German *Kellner*, "waiter", inflected for the feminine plural form in Italian, *-ine*. This word is deemed to be sufficiently clear within its context for an Italian readership, but is made even more accessible by means of a comparison in the following clause, where the description of the other traditional costumes ("camiciotti bianchi senza colletto", i.e. white shirts with no collar) is explicitly referred to "male waiters" ("i loro colleghi uomini", that is their male colleagues).

In this example the translator addresses her readers as if they were rather sophisticated and happy to be confronted by cultural difference. This strategy can either be the result of a carefully-planned approach to the translation of CSIs, or the final outcome of a series of creative but accidental interventions. In either case, it appears to be successful.

However, my point is not to say that the use of words such as "Kellnerine" validates my views on the translation of tourism discourse as an activity going beyond a simple process of cross-cultural transfer, in the direction of meaning-making. Instead, this example has been used because it provides a very good example of the sort of results that students may achieve if they are taught to be creative when translating cultural difference.

5. Conclusion: Managing the Risks of Accessibility

Many translation scholars agree on the necessity of adopting a target or naturalizing approach in the translation of tourist texts (e.g. Newmark 1988, Hatim 2001, Kelly 1997). Corpora analyses of translations of tourism discourse have amply demonstrated that a general tendency towards a more or less radical domestication of CSIs is normally adopted by translators working in this field (Nigro, 2006, Pierini, 2007, Cappelli 2008, Gandin 2015). It is the language of tourism itself that appears to require such a domesticating approach, by promising tourists a "home away from home", as Dann has aptly put it (1996). Speaking about such specific genres as guidebooks and travel articles, Cappelli has recently argued: "These genres are meant to bridge two cultures and to lead tourists and readers in their discovery of the host country while, at the same time, "protecting" them by making the unknown familiar and desirable. In addition, they help them better understand the host culture by reducing the cultural gap" (2013: 369).

While I believe that bridging, or rather recreating cultures and their intrinsic differences is a fundamental task for the translator of tourism discourse, I wonder whether translation teachers should not also teach students to be creative, and prepare them to take some risks. The risk I am referring to here is that of producing translations that highlight cultural difference, or at least play with it, rather than downplaying it by exploiting domestic, familiar images.

Translators normally tend to avoid communicative risks (cfr. Katan 2016). Pym offers a very convincing explanation for the reasons that lead translators in general to adopt a target approach: "translators are basically nurturers, helpers, assistants, self-sacrificing mediators who tend to work in situations where receivers need added cognitive assistance (i.e. easier texts).” (2008:323). The result is what Venuti (1995) has called a “fluent” practice of translation, and this is paramount in the translation of tourism discourse.

However, this does not have to be a strategy to be applied to all situations. According to Pym, for example, if translators were rewarded for taking risks (financially, symbolically or socially), they would be likely to do that. As he puts it himself (p. 325):

> If we are translating for advertising purposes, for example, then the insipid language of standardized translations may be unrewarded or even penalized, and gains will be found by taking the risks of invention or, in some circumstances, extreme interference from the foreign.

Hence, as Katan has aptly put it, translation students should “move away from the search for text-bound formal equivalence and learn to take risks” (Katan, 2009, 282), finding out ways to manage them, so as to translate cultural difference in the best possible way, by opting, whenever possible, for strategies enhancing and promoting the circulation of meaning. Mediated, but still distinctively different, cultural identity is what has to be made accessible across languages and cultures.

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