Translation is a Delicate Dance: Unpredictable Trajectories in Normative Environments. Anticipative and Configurative Translational Practice for National Geographic

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Reference


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Translation is a Delicate Dance: unpredictable trajectories in normative environments

Anticipative and Configurative Translational Practice for National Geographic

Background

In Translation Studies, few authors have dealt with predictable or unpredictable features of translation. Analyzing genre structures in the film language of films, Taylor (2006) identifies genrelets (love scenes, phone calls, presentations, service encounters) where patterns of expressions are used over and over again (repetition and obligatoriness), thus becoming more transparent and predictable; Taylor's concept of predictability is based on a linguistic perspective (derived from the idea of genre consisting of a number of obligatory features by Halliday and Hasan, as well from the 'priming' mechanism by Hoey, occurring with collocations, colligations and pragmatic patterns). Research on simultaneous interpreting has led Chernov (1979, 2002) to propose a model for the interpreter to predict the meaning of a message: this predictability is based on inferential reasoning and redundancy. In this context, probability prediction is studied within a cognitive framework, on the strength of experimental research. In Translation Studies, however, predictability is implicitly related to the notion of norm, as in Toury (2002). Norms are seen as instructions to select (in a way that it is clear what is prescribed and forbidden) from among a series of alternatives when the situation allows for different behavior options. Norms are intersubjective scalar constraints (from general-objective to idiosyncratic rules) and work as control mechanisms, generating strategies of action and grounding assessments and sanctions. Toury considers translation to be a norm-governed activity, responding to the language/cultural norms of the receiving system (acceptability) while representing the original texts that responds to the language/culture norms of the source system (adequacy). In this view, normativity-in-act generates more or less predictable translation strategies and products.

Aim of the talk and analyzed material

In this paper I shall adopt Toury's perspective in order to investigate how norms are set to create predictable solutions by stemming the inferential flow while translating. I shall focus on National Geographic's (NG) translational practice which considers translation “a delicate dance – a true art that remains faithful to the author's original text and yet sounds original in translation”. I shall discuss the extra-textual elements that constitute a highly normative environment for the French translator and editor: the NG’S translation charter stating the philosophy of translation; the background information accompanying the original texts delivered to the French editor; the review and editing process.

Against the normative apparatus by NG aimed at predicting and reducing erroneous interpretations, reconfiguration and reselection on the level of content and expression still occur in translation. Any such instance of apparently unpredictable trajectories are to be regarded, with Lotman (1993), a ‘moment of explosion’, i.e. a set of possibilities to be adopted and applied to the analysis of textual as well as visual features.
References