CULTURE SPECIFIC REFERENCES

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Abstract

The main focus of my analysis is the translation of culture specific references (CSRs). This subject, which is explored from a theoretical point has widely been recognized as one of the most problematic translation issues, not only in the field of audiovisuals but also in literary translation in general. Their transfer into other languages and cultures is particularly relevant in the case of fiction television texts as this kind of audiovisual program usually contains a great number of cultural elements. Their role in the text can be varied, and the specific function they fulfil in the various series composing the corpus is analyzed. Generally speaking, such elements are used by authors to give color and substance to their scripts and to provide the text with features which are often intimately embedded in the source culture (SC) and to which the audience, or parts of the audience, can relate. They stimulate mnemonic associations and at the same time appeal directly to people's emotions as they can evoke images and feelings that are familiar to the source audience (SA).

The first problem in defining a culture specific reference derives from the fact that, in a language, everything is practically culture specific, including language itself. Relatively few scholars in Translation Studies, and even less in Audiovisual translation, offer systematic definitions of CSRs (culture specific references). In what follows, an overview is offered of the most relevant academic approaches to [1]these cultural elements, which have been referred to using a vast array of terms: 'culture specific,' 'culture bound references, elements, terms, items, expressions', 'realia', 'allusions' or, more generally, 'cultural references. 'Culture specific' (or, interchangeably, 'culture-bound') is the preferred definition of this kind of elements in this work, although the more general term of 'cultural references' may occasionally be used.

One of the earliest scholars who attempted to pinpoint the characteristics of culture specific terms and expressions is Finkel, for whom these elements "stand out from the common lexical context, they distinguish themselves for their heterogeneity, and consequently they require a reinforcement of attention in order to be decoded". Only a few years later, Vlahov and Florin, defining more precisely the nature of CSRs, which they termed 'realia', offered a now classical definition, according to which these elements are words or composed locutions typical of a geographical environment, of a culture, of the material life or of historical-social peculiarities of a people, nation, country, or tribe and which, thus, carry a national, local or historical coloring and do not have precise equivalents in other languages. Tomaszczyk argues that even if, by definition, the set of culture-bound lexical units should include only those items which represent "objects, ideas, and other phenomena that are truly unique to a given speech community", the boundary between culture-bound terms and non-culture specific vocabulary is a fuzzy one and depends merely on a matter of degree.

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[1] Chaume, Frederic. 2004. "Film studies and translation studies: two disciplines at stake in audiovisual translation". Meta 49(1): 12–24.

Culture specific references could be included in the wider group of untranslatable words. The scholar Leemets defines them as:

"Every language has words denoting concepts and things that another language has not considered worth mentioning, or that are absent from the life or consciousness of the other nation. The reasons are differences in the ways of life, traditions, beliefs, historical developments in one word, the cultures of the nations. Also, differences can be observed on conceptual level. Different languages often nominate concepts from different viewpoints, and they also tend to classify them slightly differently."

Although Leemets focuses more generally on all lexical gaps between two languages, her emphasis on culture makes the quotation perfectly suitable to culture-bound material. The last part of the quotation in particular— "different languages often nominate concepts from different viewpoints"— synthesizes an aspect which is not always stressed by other scholars: similar concepts or objects may exist both in the source and in the target language, but the viewpoint from which the two cultures involved look at them may be different. Mailhac, on the other hand, is more specifically concerned with the nature of CSRs, which he defines even more interestingly by stating that:

"By cultural reference we mean any reference to a cultural entity which, due to its distance from the target culture, is characterized by a sufficient degree of opacity for the target reader to constitute a problem".

This definition is particularly useful because, by referring to the degree of opacity, Mailhac emphasizes how the interpretation of cultural references is characterized by a varying degree of subjectivity. His mention of the distance between TC and SC indicates the relativity of the concept, which is the main cause of the difficulty in finding univocal and unambiguous strategies for the translation of these references. It can also be safely stated that the understanding of these particular elements may constitute a problem even for a part of the SA or readership since not all people from a given country or community will necessarily know the meaning of a given reference, even if it is supposed to belong to their own culture. This may be due to different educational and social backgrounds or generation gaps, as people belonging to a given social class or age group may be completely ignorant of an item which is extremely popular for another class or age group. Nevertheless, however ignorant part of the SA may be, that does not imply that these elements are not at least potentially retrievable by the culture of origin, while only a small or negligible portion of the TA might have easy access to the same reference.[2]

Always in the field of audiovisuals but in reference to subtitling, another Spanish scientist Santamaria Guinot defines cultural references as the objects and events created within a given culture which have a distinctive cultural capital, intrinsic to the whole society and with the potential of modifying the expressive value conferred to the individuals who are related to that value. Although the focus of this definition is on elements created within a given culture, the author also calls the attention to the fact that all cultural references should be taken into account when conducting an analysis and not only those which can diverge between the source and the target culture. In the discussion of these items, and again in a study on subtitling, Pedersen creates yet another term:

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[2] Díaz Cintas, Jorge. 2012. "Clearing the smoke to see the screen: ideological manipulation in audiovisual translation", in Jorge Díaz Cintas (ed.) The Manipulation of Audiovisual Translation , Meta special issue, 57(2): 279–293.

Extralinguistic Culture-bound Reference (ECR) is defined as reference that is attempted by means of any culture-bound linguistic expression, which refers to an extralinguistic entity or process, and which is assumed to have a discourse referent that is identifiable to relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopedic knowledge of this audience.

Although the author explains his choice of the term 'extralinguistic' by considering these cultural items as not being part of a language system, thereby explicitly excluding what he calls "intra-linguistic culture-bound references, such as idioms, proverbs, slang and dialects", the term 'extralinguistic' would exclude not only the linguistic features mentioned by the author but also expressions relative to concepts and customs—for example, 'when the ball drops', in reference to a New Year's Eve tradition in the USA—or, more importantly, to quotations and allusions to other texts which would be difficult to defi ne as extralinguistic entities. It could be argued that we could not possibly consider a reference to the "Yes we can" speech by Barack Obama or to "two houses both alike in dignity" from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet as 'extra' linguistic" and it would seem inappropriate not to consider them as culture specific references as they are in fact are essential cultural references specific to a given culture.

By discussing these principles, it can be summarized that culture specific references are of two types: extralinguistic and intralinguistic. But it should be kept in mind that the opinion of different scholars and translators around the globe vary at this point.

Moving to classifications of culture bound references the scholar Sapir identifies his own definition. Sapir describes the close connection between vocabulary and culture in these terms:

Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people and changes of the meaning, loss of old words, the creation and borrowing of new ones are all dependent on the history of culture itself. Languages differ widely in the nature of their vocabularies. Distinctions which seem inevitable to us may be ignored in languages which reflect an entirely different type of culture, while these in turn insist on distinctions which are all but intelligible to us.

Thus, every language has different semantic ranges and different ways of grouping objects and concepts. If this is true for the general vocabulary, it is even truer for culture specific vocabulary which carries with it a whole world of images and associations. Some of the leading scholars who have dealt with the study of CSRs have proposed classifications to group them. From a translational perspective, taxonomies of CSRs have also been put forward by various scholars, including some of the ones whose definitions have been discussed in the previous section. The cultural categories proposed by Newmark and adapted from Nida, are well known, and they are often quoted in the relevant literature. They are based on various lexical fields associated to a culture specific lexicon and they are divided into the following categories:

• Ecology (such as terms relating to flora, fauna, geography, etc.)

• Artefacts (material culture including references to food, clothes, house, towns and means of transportation)

• Social culture (words referring to work and leisure)

• Organizations, customs, activities, and so on (such as political and administrative references, religious, historical or artistic terms)

• Gestures and habits.

A few authors point out that this classification is useful to organize these kinds of elements but it has been criticized for its rigidity and lack of contextualization.

Other authors provide even more general lists divided into various categories. For example, Bugarski refers to "cultural elements and 60 Culture Specific References systems—ranging from food, clothing, work, leisure, and sports to economy, politics, religion, law, and philosophy"; whilst Rantanen puts forward a taxonomy based on Newmark's, in which CSRs are listed in terms of lexical fields with a general lack of systematicity. A more detailed taxonomy, however, is included in Díaz Cintas and Remael, who distinguish among the following:

Geographical References
 • Objects from physical geography: savannah, mistral, tornado
• Geographical objects: downs, Plaza Mayor
• Endemic animal and plant species: sequoia, zebra

Ethnographic References
 • Objects from daily life: tapas, trattoria, igloo
• References to work: farmer, gaucho, machete, ranch
 • References to art and culture: blues, Thanksgiving, Romeo and Juliet
 • References to descent: gringo, Cockney, Parisienne
 • Measures: inch, euro, pound

Socio-Political References
• References to administrative or territorial units: county, bidonville , state
 • References to institutions and functions: Reichstag , sheriff, Congress
• References to sociocultural life: Ku Klux Klan, Prohibition, landed gentry
• References to military institutions and objects: Feldwebel, marines, Smith & Wesson.[3]

These classifications include mostly lexical categories, although the reference to Romeo and Juliet in the art and culture field, as the title of the play or as character names, seems to broaden the concept by possibly including quotations and allusions to works of art and literature. Being one of the most detailed, this list of categories has been considered as a point of reference in this work, although as we will see, this book focuses on the relationship between references and a given culture or cultures more than on finding clear-cut categories for each item.

Pedersen proposes a non-exhaustive list, limited to the purpose of his study, which includes "domains" deduced from the corpus he analyzed and "taken into consideration inasmuch as they can be used to explain subtitling regularities"

Pedersen's comment to his principle is important in that it emphasizes how even if these categories overlap to a certain extent, and thus compiling an exhaustive taxonomy Culture Specific References 61 is probably utopian and futile, domains are still useful if employed more generally to explain subtitling behavior. In other words, taxonomies cannot be used to determine without ambiguity whether a given element belongs to one particular category or another, but they can be very useful to analyze the nature of culture bound references.

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[3] Toury, Gideon. 1995. Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond. Amsterdam: John Benjamins

In discussing the parameters which influence the choices of the translators, Pedersen introduces the terms of 'transcultural' and 'monocultural' references and the notion of the 'centrality of reference', all of them invaluable concepts for the present reflection on the nature of CSRs. One of Pedersen's fundamental parameters is 'transculturality', that is the way in which, in the modern world, cultures are interconnected one to the other. This implies that cultural elements which were once familiar only to one culture are now accessible at a global level and thus are not, strictly speaking, culture specific, if by this term we mean 'specific to a single culture'. That is the case of references which today can be considered universally known. Pedersen proposes to make a distinction between

 (1) transcultural elements, which are globally known and "retrievable from common encyclopedic knowledge of the ST and TT audience", for example, Jacques Cousteau

(2) monocultural elements, of which Pedersen does not provide an example in the quoted study, but which, unlike the former, "can be assumed to be less identifiable by the majority of people of the TT audience than it is to the relevant ST audience, due to differences in encyclopedic knowledge".[4]

(3) micro cultural elements, which are so specific that they are known only to a limited part of even the SA, for example, the name of a street of a given area. The second parameter proposed by Pedersen is "intertextuality", which determines if a CSR exists outside the ST (as most cultural references do) or not. If they do not, then references are considered "text internal"; that is, they are created ad hoc for the text at hand. In our corpus, for example, the fictional café Central Perk in Friends is text internal as it does not exist in reality and is a fictional element of the text. The third parameter is the "centrality of reference", which Pedersen rightly considers one of the most influencing. It refers to references which either on a macro or micro level, or both, are central to the text; that is, they may represent a central theme or leitmotif of the text. He mentions the example of the film The Bridges of Madison County in which the CSR contained in the title, the bridges of that particular USA county, are central to the plot of the film. This centrality obviously influences the choices of the translators. The four following parameters proposed by Pedersen are conceived especially for subtitling. 'Inters miotic redundancy' derives from the polysemiotic nature of audiovisual texts in which the information carried by the different channels may sometimes overlap, so that, for a subtitler, there may be no need to translate verbal information that is also conveyed by images or the soundtrack, particularly when faced with the need of 62 Culture Specific References reducing the ST.

In dubbing, intersemiotic redundancy is rarely an influencing parameter as theoretically all the verbal information can be translated. 'Context', as a further influencing parameter, is also thought of with the subtitling process in mind: redundant information may be contained in the rest of the text (e.g., repetitions in a dialogue), and thus there is no need to translate them if this information is otherwise conveyed. In dubbing, all redundancies are theoretically translated, and any manipulations or omissions are due to considerations which are in fact the object of the present analysis. 'Media-specific constraints' are also conceived by Pedersen as constraints on the subtitling process. This parameter, however, may also be applied to dubbing in the form of lip-synch and isochrony. The final parameter quoted by Pedersen concerns 'paratextual considerations', that is, issues related to the Skopos theory-TT audience-related issues such as age groups, familiarity of the audience with the main theme of the programs, and so on; broadcasting-related issues such as the nature of the broadcaster, the time of

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[4] Sapir, Edward. 1949/1985. Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality. Berkeley: University of California Press.

programming, and so on; and issues related to pragmatic matters such as deadlines and remuneration of the translators. Most of Pedersen's parameters, especially the fi rst one involving transculturality, have influenced the proposed categories on the nature of CSRs used in the present work and illustrated in the following section. Chiaro also refers to the problem of translating CSRs in audiovisuals by including them in what she terms "translational hurdles", which she divides into the following:

1. Highly culture-specific references (e.g., place names, references to sports and festivities, famous people, monetary systems, institutions, etc.)

2. Language-specific features (terms of address, taboo language, etc.)

3. Areas of overlap between language and culture (songs, rhymes, jokes, etc.) [5]

Interestingly, Chiaro considers three macro categories of which only the first directly refers to CSRs. However, the third, the areas of overlap between language and culture, is also related to cultural elements. To my knowledge, she is the first scholar in AVT to tackle the problem, however in passing, of the difficult categorization of some cultural elements due to their linguistic nature and not, as it is customarily defined, extralinguistic nature. The "songs" she mentions in the third subdivision, for example, are certainly cultural elements, although a chorus from Grease or an aria by Rossini would hardly be included in a taxonomy composed of mainly lexical items. The need for a functional division into domains that might help define the nature of the CSRs analyzed in the present corpus has also guided my attempts to find a suitable classification.

Abbreviations used in the article
AVT audiovisual translation
CS culture specific
CSR culture specific reference
SA source audience
SC source culture
SL source language
ST source text
TA target audience
TC target culture
TL target language
 TT target text

References
1. Chaume, Frederic. 2004. "Film studies and translation studies: two disciplines at stake in audiovisual translation". Meta 49(1): 12–24.
2. Diaz Cintas, Jorge. 2012. "Clearing the smoke to see the screen: ideological manipulation in audiovisual translation", in Jorge Díaz Cintas (ed.) The Manipulation of Audiovisual Translation, Meta special issue, 57(2): 279–293.
3.Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Andrea Deumert and William L. Leap. 2005. Introducing Sociolinguistics. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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[5] Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

4. Sapir, Edward. 1949/1985. Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality. Berkeley: University of California Press. Toury, Gideon. 1995. Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

5. Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.