Editorial
Conceptualising Linguistic and Cultural Mediation

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Abstract

This editorial discusses some issues associated with the definition of 'language and culture mediation', in order to contextualise the reflections found in this special issue. This expression, rather controversial in some countries, is often used to describe activities of assistance to foreigners, mainly migrants, similar to or coinciding with public service interpreting. A component of mediation is also recognised in the translator's profession as s/he mediates between the source text and the final readers, and between the relevant cultures. But language and culture mediation can be interpreted more broadly, to refer also to situations of cultural contact involving a process of culture learning and synthesis. In this interpretation, rather than specific professional profiles, it designates various activities and situations involving mediation between cultures, e.g. in tourism communication, or in the promotion of culturally relevant products for export. Hence, it is argued that many problems surrounding the denomination 'language and culture mediation' are due to its use in specific contexts, while, if used as a superordinate, this expression can embrace various actions, activities and professional profiles having the common property of granting mutual accessibility to languages and cultures.

Keywords: culture learning, culture mediation, language mediation, public service interpreting, translation.

1. Introduction

The focus of this special issue is on the definition of 'linguistic and cultural mediation' oft times referred to as 'language and culture mediation'.

In some countries, this rather contentious nomenclature has caused controversies and misunderstandings, and has also given rise to inaccurate degree programme labelling and course descriptions in our universities.

In this editorial, our objective is to contextualize some of the reflections found in the papers presented here.

To start with, it is useful to look at the question in general terms. In recent years, the notion of mediation has become increasingly popular in various forms and contexts (family mediation, workplace mediation, consumer mediation, community mediation, etc.), apparently indicating an underlying desire to prefer negotiation to litigation, to bridge gaps, to achieve communication effectively and without asymmetries, etc.

Linguistic and intercultural mediation is one of such forms. It has proliferated as a result of the intensification of international exchanges and migration flows and is used to designate a whole range of professional activities in the area of interpreting and translation, and the corresponding educational and training programmes. However, the definitions of it that are most common are subject to significant variations across countries and tend to be somewhat vague and inconsistent.

Particularly controversial has been the professional figure of the linguistic and cultural mediator, who bears differences and similarities with that of the public service interpreter. Indeed, many scholars have criticized the very introduction of the denomination itself. For example, with reference to the Italian situation, Blini (2008) questions the correctness of the use of this term to describe a professional figure that is usually defined by mentioning its shortcomings (not a professionally trained interpreter, not a full-fledged translator…). He goes so far as to argue that the term is an Italian invention and is not based on any previous similar use of the expression in any other country.

But it will be shown here that, in actual fact, the use of this expression in the context of interlinguistic and intercultural relations dates back at least several decades and, provided its content is adequately defined, the rationale underlying its use is far from 'incorrect'.

2. The 'mediating person'

A few decades ago, Stephen Bochner in approaching the problem from the viewpoint of social psychology, defined the role of the mediator in this way: "The mediating person is an individual who serves as a link between two or more cultures and social systems. The essence of the mediating

function is to shape exchanges between the participating societies so that the contact will benefit those cultures, on terms that are consistent with their respective value systems" (Bochner 1981, 3). This is a very general definition, which – in addition to translation and interpreting – embraces mediating roles that are inherent in a wide range of situations of cultural contact: dissemination of technical innovations, migration, international trade relations, multi-cultural education, cross-cultural counselling, academic, business and military 'sojourn', tourism, etc. (ibid.).

Thus – as will be discussed in more depth below – cultural mediation in its broader meaning also refers to situations of cultural contact that involve a process of culture learning, where there are persons favouring such a process, whether spontaneously or professionally.

Within this very broad conceptualization, Bochner distinguishes quite aptly between two types of mediating functions: the mediator-as-translator whose purpose is "to represent one culture to another faithfully and thereby contribute to mutual understanding and accurate cross-cultural knowledge"; and the mediator-as-synthesizer, whose purpose is "to reconcile disparate culture practices, this type of mediation having special relevance to exchanges from which some action is to follow" (ibid.).

This overall distinction can be used as a broad template for the representations and categorizations of linguistic and cultural mediation under discussion in this special issue.

2.1. *The mediator-as-translator*

The broad categorization 'mediator-as-translator' includes a whole range of translational activities, which in contemporary approaches to translation studies are no longer limited to the mere transfer of linguistic material.

2.1.1. The mediator as a translator of the written word

A professional figure that has seldom been associated with a mediating role is that of the translator, i.e. the translator of written texts as opposed to the 'interpreter' of oral exchanges.

The idea that the translator is by necessity also a mediator was brought home a few decades ago by Hatim and Mason (1990), who titled the last section of their 1990 book "The Translator as Mediator". In the translating process, they saw two mediating components. The translator is a privileged reader of the source text, who decodes in order to re-

encode, standing in the middle between two parties for the purpose of making communication possible (Hatim and Mason 1990, 223-224). In this respect, especially crucial is the translator's role as a reader since by definition all texts inherently present gaps and interstices and rely on the reader's work and interpretative initiative to fill them in (Eco 1979, 52). Secondly, the translator "mediate[s] between cultures (including ideologies, moral systems and socio-political structures) seeking to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning" (Hatim and Mason 1990, 223). S/he also mediates between legal systems, an especially sensitive kind of translation which qualifies as a form of 'knowledge transfer' (Londei and Callari Galli 2011, IX-XII). In this view, the translators act as mediators as they guarantee TL receivers linguistic and cultural accessibility to the source text, so that the latter can read it without encountering any element that is culturally opaque or unintelligible. But on account of its macro-cultural significance the translators' mediation function goes well beyond this merely textual dimension in that it mediates knowledge and cultural products (e.g. bodies of literary works), transferring them to other countries and other cultural systems. In the last few decades translation research has brought home the idea that translations are essentially cultural facts – indeed, facts of target cultures (Toury 2012, 20, 23) – resulting from a cultural transfer, while the translator is seen as a *bi-cultural expert* (Vermeer 1986 and 1996, 67) or cultural broker. Thanks to the translator's endeavour, literary works are mediated into other cultures and become part of receiving literary systems (Even-Zohar [1987] 2001). But this is also true of other kinds of texts, some of which – e.g. movies, essays, research papers, advertisements, etc. – have a substantial influence on the receiving systems and give rise to new trends and new social or cultural phenomena.

A further element of mediation in the role of translators has to do with their personalities and ideologies, as the act itself of de-coding and re-coding discourse leaves ample margin for manipulation and for the (conscious or unconscious) transfer of the translators' ideologies, in the sense defined by Mason "as the set of beliefs and values which inform an individual's or institution's view of the world and assist their interpretation of events, facts and other aspects of experience" (Mason 2009, 86), into the translated texts. Neubert and Shreve (1992) also point out that the translation process involves the confrontation of (a) two language systems and (b) two knowledge systems, in that knowledge is not necessarily framed in the same way in different cultures. Indeed, the alterity may be so profound as to impede the transfer of meaning and consequently the transfer of both understanding and knowledge. This is what Aleida

Assmann has referred to as "radical alterity" (cf. Assmann 1996, 99), a condition that translators ethically acknowledge, accepting the difference as their "foremost ethical claim" (ibid.). But at the same time they strive diligently to overcome it, above all in problematic situations, e.g. in armed conflicts, where its failure may result in potentially catastrophic consequences (Archibald 2008, 175-176).

In this respect, it can be stated that translators are mediators, and that this dimension is an inherent and unavoidable part of their job.

2.1.2. The (oral) linguistic and cultural mediator

The mediator's role has been more frequently associated with the translation of oral exchanges, i.e. with activities that have traditionally been classified within the domain of the interpreting profession, all the more so as the word 'mediator' has often been used to designate several kinds of professional figures engaged in the linguistic and cultural assistance of foreigners and in non-conference interpreting assignments. Thus, the idea has taken hold that the dialogue interpreter, especially if employed in the social, is the mediator *par excellence*. The denominations used in this domain include various professional figures introduced in the last few decades in various countries to cater for the needs of an increasingly multilingual and multicultural society, with various very similar denominations, 'language mediator', 'language and culture mediator' (or: 'linguistic and cultural mediator'), 'culture (or: cultural) mediator', and a whole range of variations, such as 'intercultural translator' and 'intercultural mediator' (*interkulturelle Übersetzerin*, *interkulturellen VermittlerInnen* in Switzerland), 'intercultural mediator' (health care sector), 'social interpreter' and 'social translator' (for the social sector) in Belgium, etc. (cf. Transkom 2012). It is usually taken for granted that such denominations are broadly equivalent or at least akin to the English expressions 'community interpreter', 'public service interpreter' or 'liaison interpreter' (e.g. Transkom 2012, 5; cf. also Guidère 2010, and especially Archibald 2010).

But whether their denominations record it or not, all these professions include a translational component, which – in contexts where one of the interlocutors does neither understand nor speak the language of the exchange – is obviously the *sine qua non* for communication, although in certain circles this is more or less explicitly questioned, and the absolute primacy of the cultural component is emphasised. Of course, as is all too frequently repeated in the literature and in published vocational and professional profiles, a public service interpreter's role goes well beyond mere translation, and this is quite obvious, as translation is not only a literal

transposition of a text but entails – to differing degrees depending on specific cases – a cultural transfer. In some cases in the profiles of (inter) cultural mediators and social interpreters, the cultural mediation component is substantial. It may include assistance to foreigners in coping with problems during initial contact, with different health and illness concepts, mutual lack of understanding, different norms and values, socioculturally different modes of behaviour, different conceptions about social practices, such as inclusion of family, gender relationships and upbringing of children (Transkom 2012, 1).

But this should not conceal the fact that the first and main task of a linguistic/cultural mediator is to facilitate linguistic exchanges as far as possible. The denial of this simple notion in favour of an insistence on the intercultural component is problematic in different respects. First of all, downplaying the importance of the interpreting component may bring with it the idea that professional training is not required. This may in a way increase the availability of persons employable as interpreters in a context where professionals are a rare commodity and the list of language pairs is much larger than in the past. At the same time it may also be used to justify the very low pay commanded by public service interpreters in most countries.

Secondly, highlighting the 'assistance' element in the mediator's profession often leads to subscribing to a prevalence of the 'cultural advocate model' of the interpreter's role over the 'impartial model' which is embedded in the codes of ethics of most professional interpreters' associations (Valero-Garcés and Martin 2008). Of course, the 'conduit' conceptualization of the interpreter's role has long been left behind, and the interpreter has been recognized to be the coordinator of other people's talk (cf. Wadensjo 1998; cf. also Roy 1996 and 2000). But taking sides, providing explanations biased by cultural judgements, taking an active role in the trialogic exchange, acting as an advocate for migrants, disadvantaged foreigners, asylum seekers, etc. are forms of behaviour that are ethically unacceptable.

It is interesting that in some countries, e.g. Switzerland and Germany, a distinction is made between the figure of intercultural interpreters and that of intercultural mediators or integration assistants. In some cases a further professional area of activity is also delimited, i.e. that of [intercultural] mediation proper (e.g. *interkulturelle Mediation* in Switzerland; *mediación intercultural* in Spain) with professionals that are called upon only when conflicts arise and an intercultural component is involved: their task is to act as an impartial third party and to help resolve conflicts fairly, constructively and on a basis of agreement through negotiation (Transkom 2012; cf. also Archibald 2007).

This is partially in line with Pöchhacker's suggestion that the cultural component be kept separate from the linguistic one: "it may be wise either to promote the intermediary activity in its own right, distinguishing as much as possible the professional function of cross-cultural mediation (in the contractual, conciliatory sense) from that of professional interpreting in community-based settings" (Pöchhacker 2008, 24). If the word 'mediator' accompanied by various modifiers like 'linguistic', 'cultural', 'intercultural' is to be used to designate a profession, this could help prevent all manner of confusion, detrimental to the status and professionalization of all the subjects involved.

It is also to be noted that other activities within the area of dialogue interpreting are often subsumed under the label of mediation, for instance that of liaison interpreters working for private institutions or business clients (e.g. Garzone 2003). This element should also be considered when generalizations are made which take for granted that the public service interpreter and the language and culture mediator are the very same professional figure.

2.2. *The mediator-as-synthesizer*

In addition to the professionally relevant profiles of mediation analysed above, Bochner (1981) also extends the notion of cultural mediation to include the status and actions of individuals who, on the basis of their own existential experience, embody the conciliation of different cultures. The mediator-as-synthesizer's role pertains to individuals at the interface between cultural systems who manage to reconcile and synthesize disparate cultural practices, without incurring the so-called 'marginal syndrome' (Bochner 1980, 17-19) that would make them fall between the various social systems and feel outsiders in both cultures (Stonequist 1935 and 1937; Taft 1981, 59-60) Thus, they can transcend the cultures concerned, and yet comprehend the signals used in the expression of each culture. The basic mechanism at play in this case is that of culture-learning, which involves cognitive and competence as well as an affective component (Bochner 1981, 13).

Amongst the situations that can expose people to new cultures and lead to the development of mediating abilities, there are sojourns (e.g. overseas students, technical aid experts), settling (immigrants, captives), subcultural mobility (entrants into a profession), segregation (hospital patients, prisoners), changes in society (modernization, military occupation) (Taft 1981, 54), but also expatriation, tourism, sojourn for business

purposes, etc. All situations that require "coping with an unfamiliar culture and involve a degree of culture learning and behavioural adaptation as a result of which the person becomes increasingly multicultural" (Taft 1981, 54).

Obviously, this kind of cultural mediation that is internalized is an ideal background for those wishing to enter the linguistic/cultural mediator's profession. The increasing diversity of immigrant societies ends up providing opportunities for development and greater intercultural understanding. Indeed, following upon the original work of Everett Stonequist, Richard Kahlenberg (1996) underscored the importance of diversity as an equalizer in immigrant societies which struggle to avoid and eliminate discriminatory behaviours.

In actual fact, the notion of mediation as cultural synthesis can be extended to include mediating activities in general, rather than specific professional profiles, seeing such activities as sites of mediation between cultures, i.e. sites where different cultures do get in contact and come to terms with each other. This is the case of communication in tourism and in the promotion of culturally relevant products (e.g. fashion, traditional food products, political/institutional communication across countries) for export. The cultural mediation process can be all the more meaningful when it takes place in the no-man's-land of web-mediated communication.

3. Conclusions

The definition of 'linguistic and cultural mediation' that emerges from the discussion is quite diversified and complex, including a wide range of mediating activities, situations and professions. But at the same time the picture can be greatly simplified if all such activities, situations and professions, are subsumed under a single heading, having in common the fact that they make languages and cultures mutually accessible, make exchange and negotiations among them possible, and in so doing contribute to creating new knowledge. The linguistic appropriation of unfamiliar knowledge frames, concepts and methods is an important source of innovation and renewal for any discipline and an important source of inspiration to foster creativity and new ways of thinking (cf. Londei and Callari Galli 2011, X).

Hence, it can be stated that many of the problems surrounding the denomination 'linguistic and cultural mediation' are essentially due to its

use in specific contexts, e.g. to designate one or another particular profession in the area of linguistic and cultural assistance. By contrast, if used as a superordinate, this denomination can very well serve the purpose of embracing a whole range of actions, roles, professional profiles and activities having the common property of granting mutual accessibility to people from different languages and cultures, and helping them communicate and gain mutual understanding.

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