# Localization from the Perspective of Translation Studies: Overlaps in the Digital Divide?

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*Abstract*. From the perspective of Translation Studies, localisation processes appear to overlook the full range of effects that can be achieved by translations, at the same time as they offer little that is radically different from a dynamic view of translation practices. Here it is argued that discourses on localisation nevertheless offer a substantially new view of cross-cultural communication. This is mainly because of the central role of internationalisation, which builds on a concept of artificial equivalence in order to centralise decision-making power in a professional interculture, understood as a place created in the overlaps of primary cultures. A brief survey is offered of the ways in which the findings of Translation Studies might help one understand not just the linguistic aspects of localisation, but also the power of localisation to influence the development of languages and cultures. It is argued that complete localisation, of the kind that makes the foreign appear domestic, risks locking cultures into passive consuming positions. Better localisation might use the full resources of translation and non-translation in order to allow consumers eventually to become producers.

## What is Translation Studies?

Translation Studies is the academic discipline or interdiscipline that studies translation processes and products. It has undergone spectacular growth since the 1980s, in close relation with the rising demand for translator training. In this sense, Translation Studies may be seen as part of a specifically European response to economic globalisation, stressing the need for multilingualism. The discipline nevertheless remains seriously underdeveloped in the United States, where there is little translator training and where debates about translation more often concern literary studies.

## Translation Studies and Localization

Translation Studies has met the concepts of localization rather late, starting in the late 1990s. The first encounters were not especially academic, since localization was and largely remains an industry discourse, with some technical rigour but few humanistic preoccupations. Translation Studies has instead met localization through the training institutions, particularly through the need to prepare students for real-world employment.

From the perspective of Translation Studies, the industry discourse on localization seems strange, at best, on at least two counts:

- Within localization models, translation is reduced to just one small step in a larger process. Most theorists of translation, of the other hand, would want to see localization as just a part of translation. This has given rise to considerable debate and more than a little discontent (see ISG 2003).
- Localization models mostly recognize two kinds of processes: internationalisation (for the centralized preparation of products) and localization

proper (for the adaptation of the product to locales). Translation Studies, on the other hand, has long worked with three spaces for processes: production of the source text, intervention of the translator, and reception of the target text (or translation). From that perspective, some things seem to be missing in the localizer's view of the world.

The following discussion will deal with these two problems. The first problem will allow us to explain something more about Translation Studies. The second will lead to a critique of a particular localization ideology, particularly with respect to easy solutions to digital divides.

**Translation or Localization?**

From the mid 1980s, Translation Studies underwent a paradigm shift away from a focus on the source text (to which a translation had to be equivalent) and towards a focus on the target purpose or function (since all translations are different from their sources). This was achieved by two main schools of thought.

German-language *Skopostheorie* (associated with Vermeer and Holz-Mäntärri) insisted that the intended function of a translation is generally *different* from that of its source, simply because it addresses a new audience and cultural situation. Equivalence ("functional invariance") should thus be treated as a special case at best.

In parallel, the branch known as Descriptive Translation Studies (Even-Zohar, Toury, Lambert, Hermans) drew on the historical study of translations to point out that the many different ways of translating depend very much on the cultural situation involved. Different cultures translate in different ways, and we should thus study the actual range of norms that they use.

Both these developments have seriously challenged and weakened the concept of translational equivalence. They generally model translation as a large-scale cross-cultural process of which equivalence is an almost accidental by-product. In short, this view sees translation as doing so many different things that it might as well be called localisation.

Now, after some 20 years of study and reflection on these twin fronts, translation scholars are somewhat bemused to hear that, within localization processes, translation is just process of equivalence-based language replacement, responsible at worst for overrunning the frames of dialogue boxes. Localization discourse threatens to annul those 20 years of academic debate and research.

The theorists of localization, we know, responded to the initial charge that their work was "just a language problem" (Brooks 2000). They, in turn, seem to have made *translation* into "just a language problem", at a moment when a whole academic discipline is able to demonstrate that translation is one of the main processes by which cultures develop and regulate their identities.

This is why many translation scholars now ask whether there is anything really new in localization. Or is localization just a fancy term for the more technological aspects of translation, an activity that has actually been going on for millennia?

**The Newness of Localization**

The terminology of localization brings a few welcome gifts to translation theory. "Locale", for example, is a very neat word for what translation theorists have been calling "linguistic and cultural factors", "linguaculture", and similarly unhappy phrases.

But then, if the target places are called locales, what should we call the place that localization begins from? Localization discourse seems to have no name for it. It simply says "internationalisation", which makes no sense because "nations" have nothing to do with the mode of thought. Sometimes it says "globalisation" for the same thing, which creates even more of a mess. It should probably be taking about "interlocalisation" (preparing a product for many locales), or perhaps "delocalisation" (stripping out the locale-specific features of a product). And it might usefully call the place where this things are done an "interlocale", which could be a neat way of naming the sites where our experts and companies operate. The industry, however, has created its terms in a hurry, and it seems too late to change them now.

From the perspective of Translation Studies, localization discourses look rather incoherent. They do nevertheless contain several new features:

- The role of the source text has been replaced by "internationalisation". This in itself is not a wholly new way of thinking. Since the mid twentieth century, Bible translations have been carried out not from the original tongues but from elaborate sets of philological notes, often in English. Hollywood films are often subtitled and dubbed on the basis of elaborately annotated scripts, not from the original script used for the first production. Those would be work processes very similar to internationalisation. Prior to electronic technologies, however, one struggles to find anything like that. For the ages of parchment, paper and print, translation was a bilateral process leading from text to text, source to target, no matter how many times a translation then became the source for a further translation. Now, in internationalisation, we have something passably new.

- Internationalisation in turn produces an apparently new kind of equivalence, or at least makes us aware that there has long been more than one kind. For as long as translation was a bilateral affair of sources and targets, privilege was given to what Nida termed "natural" or "dynamic" equivalents, basically linguistic structures that existed in the source and target repertoires prior to the moment of translation. When we no longer have a source, however, equivalents are artificially determined in the place of internationalisation. The central company determines what terms will be used, and can do so for all the languages involved, quite independently of previous usages in the end-locales. Localisation thus makes artificial equivalence far more visible.

- The enhanced role of artificial equivalence has consequences for the very definition of translation. Within the industry discourse on localisation, "translation" is for artificial equivalence only, restricted to the replacement of natural-language strings. All the other adaptation processes (including changes to layout, various levels of re-engineering, possible simplification, selection of degrees localization) are called by other names, often "adaptation". Translators

translate, applying artificial equivalence; the engineers, marketing experts, publishers, etc. do the rest, in effect seeking substitutes for what translation theorists might still want to call natural or dynamic equivalence. This separation of functions would seem to be new, albeit retrograde in terms of the development of Translation Studies.

- Internationalisation means that the producers of discourse are now doing far more than translators do in traditional bilateral situations. Where mediation was once modelled in terms of the lone translator (at least in the age of print), localisation requires extensive teamwork, bringing together various professional backgrounds. This is not entirely new (extensive interprofessional teams can be found in medieval translation practices), but does accentuate the role of the mediating space, for which neither translation theory nor localisation discourse has an adequate name.

The above features work together. They create a conceptual object that Translation Studies can now profitably use to revise its own categories. The key difference is probably the last-mentioned, the importance of the mediating space. From within Translation Studies, we have proposed that this space be termed a "professional interculture", understood as a set of social norms, procedures and expectations that operate in the overlaps of primary cultures. The "company culture" within which internationalisation and localisation procedures are carried out might thus be, for us, a model professional interculture.

From within Translation Studies, we thus see localisation processes working in professional "intercultures", a space that localisation has so far left unnamed. This naming is not without repercussions.

**Lessons from Translation Studies**

Translation Studies can learn much from localisation. Yet the cake cuts both ways. Localisation experts might perhaps reflect on their practice in view of the following proposed lessons from Translation Studies (on which, see Pym 2003):

- Translations are usually slightly longer than non-translations.
- Translations use a narrower range of words than non-translations (their type/token ratio is lower).
- Semantic values tend to be more explicit in translations than non-translations.
- Optional syntactic connectors are used more in translations.
- The more expert the translator, the larger the text units they work on.
- The smaller the receiving culture (not locale), the more tolerance there is of foreign language elements.
- The less prestigious the sending culture (not locale), the less tolerance there is of foreign language elements in the receiving culture.
- And so on.

These are all findings that concern cultural processes, involving larger stretches of humanity than the market-defined constraints of locales. Those findings might nevertheless help localization project managers understand why translators do not always do what one wants them to do. Translators have their own professional

psychology, and that has effects on their language. Cultures are related in many different ways, and that also influences translational language.

These findings might alert localisation experts to the rather wide range of effects that can be achieved with translation. A translation can make a product sound domestic or foreign, customary or special, and many things in between. When attempting to sell products or to develop cultures (or better, to do both at the same time), you overlook translation at your peril.

Localization planners should be especially aware that the range of translation strategies is restricted by the nature of the target culture involved. To spell out the above findings, a relatively large culture will not accord translation a central role and will tend to be intolerant of foreign-sounding language. On the other hand, smaller cultures depend more vitally on translation and are usually more tolerant of not just foreignised language but also the presence of several languages at once. Such cultures tend to attribute prestige to selected foreign cultures, either in the present or in the past, and encourage movement in the direction of those cultures.

**Privilege the wider view**

Translation Studies has several millennia of material to look at; localisation counts the life-cycle of its products in terms of months. That difference, if nothing else, should enable translation scholars to offer perspectives and considerations that are not normally found in the localisation industry.

We might, for example, recount the ways in which translation has influenced the formation and development of cultural identities. My own research has dealt with the Hispanic field from this perspective (Pym 2000). Here is a potted history: Translation from Arabic facilitated the development of scientific terms in Latin and Castilian in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as the dialogic narrative forms that became the novel. Translations from Spanish and then French brought the novel into European languages. Translations from Latin and Italian subsequently removed much of the Arabic from Spanish in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Translations from French introduced political liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And translations from English, of course, are now shortening Spanish sentences and cultural memories in the interests of technology. The history of the language and its culture is a history of its translations, or can be seen as such.

It follows that localisation will have its own special effects on the future of our languages and cultures, and not just on the economies of market-level locales. These concerns are certainly not entirely absent from discourses on localisation (cf. Hall and Hudson 1997). Yet there is an occasional tendency to think that all localisation is good localisation, or that the very act of localisation can help save languages and strengthen communities. We read, for instance, in the second edition of *The Localization Primer* (Fry 2003: 10), that

> Localization allows the benefits of globalization to accrue not only to large companies and powerful nations—localization lets speakers of less common languages enjoy access to the same products that those in major markets use. In addition localization allows the flow of products and information to be two-way,

> as dominant countries receive goods and services from smaller countries that have traditionally had no access to their markets. When companies localize their products and services they help to "level the playing field" and redress economic inequalities, helping to create a better world in which no one is left out.

Without any statistics or historical perspective, this is a lot of whistling in the dark. It entirely overlooks the real asymmetries of starting positions. It naïvely assumes that the goods and services going one way are the same as those going the other (postcolonial economics suggests that the production centre always stays at least one technological step ahead of the periphery). And it falsely pretends that access to consumption is the same thing as power in production. This is the point where translation history might have something to say.

Adopting the wider view, we see that some cultures remain passive through the use of certain kinds of translation (thirteenth-century Hispania lost Latin as an intellectual language by translating everything into the vernacular), and others can remain active centres of production by refusing translation altogether (as might be said of commerce in the United States today, which assumes that everyone will learn English). Translation can restrict a culture; non-translation can extend its reach. More interestingly, cultures can move between the active and passive roles of translation, to and from the sending and receiving positions, and can do so through mixes of translation and non-translation. This is important. Although it is undoubtedly true that complete localization, the giving of the most "natural" equivalents and procedures, will help a culture accept and adapt to new technology, such localization might equally keep that culture in a perpetually passive position. In this, the ideologies of localisation betray a short-sighted view. If you keep giving people easy translations, they will finish up needing easy translations.

One of the prime lessons of translation history must be that translation can do many things. It can pretend that the foreign is essentially domestic; it can alternatively lead users out from the locales of passive consumption and towards the intercultures of intellectual production.

Our sincere hope is that a greater awareness of translation will enable localisation planners to balance those alternatives. It is ultimately a question of ethics, as well as efficiency.

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