

## Towards a Socio-Cultural Turn in Translation Teaching: A Canadian Perspective

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Volume 50, Number 4, décembre 2005

Pour une traductologie proactive — Actes  
For a Proactive Translatology — Proceedings  
Por una traductología proactiva — Actas

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019906ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/019906ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Whitfield, A. (2005). Towards a Socio-Cultural Turn in Translation Teaching: A Canadian Perspective. *Meta*, 50(4). <https://doi.org/10.7202/019906ar>

Article abstract

While current translation theory is beginning to reconcile cultural and linguistic approaches to translation, this is far from the case in translation pedagogy and curriculum. This paper will argue in favour of a socio-cultural turn in translation pedagogy and curriculum design with specific reference to the Canadian/Québec context where the social, political and economic dimensions of the practice of translation, and its place within the broader area of inter-cultural communication in Canada differ depending on whether one is working into English or into French. Issues examined include redesigning curriculum to highlight the socio-cultural functions of translation, integrating culture and pedagogy, and identifying the theoretical implications of a cultural turn in translation teaching.

# Towards a Socio-Cultural Turn in Translation Teaching: A Canadian Perspective

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## RÉSUMÉ

Si, au sein des théories contemporaines de la traduction, on constate une certaine réconciliation des perspectives culturelles et linguistiques, cela est loin d'être le cas dans le domaine de l'enseignement. Partant du contexte québécois/canadien où les dimensions sociales, politiques et économiques de la traduction ainsi que son rôle dans la communication interculturelle en général diffèrent beaucoup selon que l'on traduit vers l'anglais ou vers le français, cet article démontre l'urgence d'un « virage socio-culturel » en pédagogie de la traduction. Sont examinées, entre autres, les implications d'un tel virage pour la conception des programmes d'études et des stratégies pédagogiques, ainsi que sa contribution à une réflexion théorique plus générale sur la traduction.

## ABSTRACT

While current translation theory is beginning to reconcile cultural and linguistic approaches to translation, this is far from the case in translation pedagogy and curriculum. This paper will argue in favour of a socio-cultural turn in translation pedagogy and curriculum design with specific reference to the Canadian/Québec context where the social, political and economic dimensions of the practice of translation, and its place within the broader area of inter-cultural communication in Canada differ depending on whether one is working into English or into French. Issues examined include redesigning curriculum to highlight the socio-cultural functions of translation, integrating culture and pedagogy, and identifying the theoretical implications of a cultural turn in translation teaching.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

translation pedagogy, practice of translation, inter-cultural communication

Writing in 2002, Susan Bassnett noted, perhaps overly optimistically, that “the apparent division between cultural and linguistic approaches to translation that characterized much translation research until the 1980s is disappearing” (2002: 3). She attributed the change partly to “shifts in linguistics that have seen that discipline take a more overtly cultural turn” (3), and partly to a general evolution in translation studies “more comfortable with itself, better able to engage in borrowing from and lending techniques and methods of other disciplines” (3). In the area of translation pedagogy and especially curriculum design, however, much more work needs to be done in order to integrate the principal theoretical directions generated directly or indirectly by the cultural turn. This is particularly the case for questions touching upon systemic inequalities in the translation relationship, translator agency and ethics, translation as cultural mediation, and the recognition that translation is a social, as well as a text-based, activity.

Failure to address the linguistic/cultural divide in how we develop translation training programs contributes to a variety of tensions and contradictions that often reflect, or exacerbate, existing dichotomies between theory and practice, vocational and academic training, or literary vs pragmatic translation. How political and economic forces produce macro-structural patterns of inequality in linguistic and cultural exchange may be examined in a theoretical course, while practical translation courses continue to validate translation strategies that confirm hegemonic positions. Issues of agency may be raised in discussions of feminist or post-colonial practices of literary translation, but be considered irrelevant in training students for the vast domain of pragmatic

texts where realpolitik is assumed to take precedence, with little room for negotiation. The pressures of technology and global competition reinforce the perception of the role of the translator as passive reproducer of texts, and further isolate translators in a reductive text-based mode.

Given the historical precedence of linguistic approaches to translation in the search for an effective translation methodology, research on translation pedagogy and translator training has traditionally been aimed primarily at improving student linguistic comprehension and production skills within a text-based conception of performance. Despite the cultural turn, linguistic theories of translation continue to dominate the teaching of translation. Although such theories now accord more importance to the cultural dimensions of the translative act, paradoxically, this can serve to consolidate the perception that culture is fundamentally a characteristic of text (see for example, Mejri *et al*: 2003), at the expense of a more comprehensive vision of translation as a social act of intercultural communication. While an earlier normative focus on error correction has slowly given way to more pedagogical research on the process vs the product of translation, the implicit objective of much research from the 1990s to the present nonetheless also remains text, as opposed to agent, oriented (See for example, Bell: 1991; Dollerup and Loddegaard: 1992; Delisle and Lee-Jahnke: 1998; Maia *et al*: 2002; Mareschal *et al*: 2003; Lee-Jahnke: 2005; Balliu: 2005). Similarly, reflections on translation curricula often take current market demand for translation products as their starting point, and consider that the primary pedagogical goal is to train students to attain the text performance standards required by that particular market (See for example, Carsten: 2003; Gouadec: 2003; Gile: 2005). This is an understandable and responsible objective; students want, and have a legitimate right, to employment. However, in the absence of a critical analysis of how the market is determined institutionally, translation is again presented as a text phenomenon over which the student translator, and future professional, has little or no opportunity to exercise agency.

Despite these general observations, it would be unfair, however, to suggest that current research in translation teaching has not shown the makings of a socio-cultural turn. Three other themes speak more closely to the question of the translation pedagogue's own social and pedagogical accountability, and help create the space for a socio-cultural turn in pedagogy. As early as 1992, Mary Snell-Hornby recognised the importance of a broader, more multi-dimensional training program aimed at forming the translator not only as "intellectual polymath", but "multicultural expert" (1992: 22). This theme can be seen at work in the terminology change from translator to "language services provider". While the latter reflects the marketplace in large part, it does have the merit, as Anthony Pym points out, of recognising the diversity of the translator's work, including "cultural consulting, interpreting of all kinds (since oral tasks surround the written), relations with clients, and perhaps the odd thought about the ways our communication cultures should be headed (call it 'policy')" (2002: 21). By opening up the perspective on translators' actual activities and functions, room is made for a larger view of the socio-cultural role of the translator.

A second theme is the recent interest in a student-centred approach to translation teaching, already evident in the section of papers on "Teaching and students" at the 1995 Elsinore Third Language International Conference (Dollerup and Appel: 1996). Perhaps best illustrated by Douglas Robinson's text book, *Becoming a Translator, An Accelerated Course* (1997), such a student-centred pedagogy, by focussing on the student's own agency as learner, facilitates discussion of the general question of translator agency and ethics (see also Chesterman: 2000; Whitfield: 2003).

Finally, a third theme touches on the pedagogical concerns raised by the effect of globalisation and technology on translation training, with special interest for specific cultural contexts. Michael Cronin, among others, has explored "the relevance for translation studies of critiques that have been made of market utopianism and highly selective versions of pluralism", and considered ways of "restoring agency" to translators (2003: 4). His work has also embraced the cause of minority languages. The burgeoning of the discipline world-wide and the experiences of previously peripheral regions is demonstrating the increasing variety of translator training contexts, and more importantly the multi-dimensional effects of these contexts on training and learning objectives (See as examples only, Skibinska: 2002; Awaiss: 2005).

## Making the Socio-cultural Turn

While these themes prepare the way for a socio-cultural turn in translation pedagogy and curriculum design, they do not, in themselves, make the turn. In this respect, it is useful to outline what, in fact, such a complete turn might involve. Following on the logical extension of contemporary inter-disciplinary thought on translation, and for the purposes of this article, the grounds, and premises, for a socio-cultural turn in translation pedagogy and curriculum design can be grouped under the following headings:

**1- Theoretical:** we no longer consider translation theory as a neutral universal, but recognise that the elaboration of theoretical models is itself context dependent. If this is true of the theories and practices of translation, why should this not hold for the practice of teaching translation? In other words, conceptions of translation curriculum cannot be culturally or ideologically neutral.

**2- Pedagogical:** If we accept that definitions of communication, culture and translation are themselves culture-bound, why would this not hold true as well at the level of pedagogy. Put another way, student and teachers' conceptions and expectations of what constitutes effective pedagogy are also a reflection of cultural norms and conventions.

**3- Ethical:** Cultural translation studies have shown that text-based translation strategies are not ideologically neutral. How can we as professors of translation and trainers of translators reconcile our understanding of unequal power distributions in inter-linguistic/inter-cultural exchange, with our normative approach to language in the translator-training classroom?

**4- Historical/social:** Research suggests that the social function of translation has varied considerably historically, and that the act of translation has more often than not been intimately connected to other social functions: negotiation, mediation, creation or reinforcement of national identities, scientific research or vulgarisation, to name but a few (Delisle and Woodsworth: 1995). What are the contemporary manifestations of this connection between translation as text production and translation as social activity? How can our programs acknowledge and encourage the sense of social relevance and empowerment associated with this broader view of the translation context?

**5- Professional:** Contemporary research on other professional groups (medical practitioners, engineers) suggests that issues of professional gratification, including a sense of social usefulness, play an important role in long-term professional performance and motivation. At stake here is also a more complex definition of professional identity and ethics, than one based solely on text performance criteria.

**6- Economic:** As Anthony Pym, among others, has pointed out, as a result of globalisation, new technologies and the rise of English as a world language, “the market for language services is becoming increasingly segmented, if not functionally fragmented” (2002: 26). It follows, he has argued “that one of the things we should be doing as trainers is not just to supply the existing market, but to help change that market, to improve it, to make it more aware of what it is and what it can do” (2002:29). This also requires a sense that training is by nature local, and needs to assess and identify its particular strengths, or as Pym puts it, “local knowledge need not contradict comprehensive vision. In fact, it wins the distance needed for such vision” (2002:29).

**7- Geo-ecological:** An acknowledgement of the socio-cultural functions of translation raises the question of translation, and hence translators' role in the protection of cultural and linguistic diversity. This question cannot be fully addressed in a purely text-based approach to translation curriculum.

**8- Text-translative:** Text-performance oriented translation or interpretation pedagogy sooner or later comes up against the cultural/contextual conundrum of meaning (see for example Seleskovitch: 1981; Pöchhacker: 1992). Ironically, grounding in inter-cultural communication may well assist our students in improving their text-based translation functions.

## What would a socio-culturally based curriculum look like?

In a text-based definition of translation, the emphasis is on product rather than process, and the translator “decodes messages transmitted in one language and re-encodes them in another” (Bell: 1991:15). From this viewpoint, culture is a sub-category of the text, text information that the

translator must master to produce an equivalent target-language text. In a cultural turn, this movement would be reversed. Text would be a sub-category of socio-cultural communication. Translation would be one category of the larger phenomenon of inter-cultural communication, this term being understood to refer to the variety of felicitous and infelicitous, partially successful or completely unsuccessful communicative phenomena, textual and non-textual, which may occur either at the individual, collective or institutional levels when two language/cultures are in contact. The translator's primary function would be that of inter-cultural agent, and his or her practice as inter-cultural agent could encompass a variety of activities, only one of which, albeit an important one, would be the production of translated texts. The principal point, I believe, is not so much re-making as re-positioning: keeping in mind, as we think through curriculum planning, the need to continually foreground translation's role in the specific context of intercultural communication and social interaction in which our program is located.

Since a socio-cultural turn in pedagogy and curriculum is by principle context-based, the following very preliminary conceptualisation of what such an approach would mean in concrete terms is based on translation training in Canada and Québec. This context involves a primary concentration of institutionalised intercultural communicational exchanges between two linguistic groups, anglophones and francophones, spread out over several different regional cultures (on the francophone side, for instance, Franco-Ontarians, Acadians and Québécois, have different perceptions and expectations from translation). It also includes a secondary concentration of institutionalised intercultural communicational exchanges between English and French, as official languages, and First Nation languages. Finally, less constituted in institutional terms are the intercultural exchanges between speakers of these languages, and allophone groups, in Canadian terminology, composed of recent immigrants from all parts of the globe.

Loosely co-ordinated by the Canadian Association of Schools of Translation, translation curricula, focused almost exclusively on training translators working between English and French, is fairly standard in training programs throughout the country. Students complete core courses in their second language, general and specialised translation, as well as a choice of complementary courses in terminology, new technologies, translation theory, and a practicum (Valentine: 2003; Mareschal: 2005).

### **Foundation Courses**

In a culture-based translation curriculum, the core building blocks would be two foundation courses on culture and cultures in contact. The first course would envision culture not only as product but also as process, develop concepts for understanding culture in general, as well as the particular inter-cultural context in which the program is grounded. Concepts from the field of Intercultural Communications could offer a framework for understanding how culture can be defined, and assist students in pinpointing areas of cultural difference. For instance, Scollon and Scollon (1995) look at ideology (beliefs, values, religion), socialization (education, theories of the person and learning), forms of discourse (functions of language: information vs relationship, negotiation vs ratification, group harmony vs individual welfare), and non-verbal communication. Worked out in the Canada/Québec context, the course would bring to the surface how the definitions and functions of culture themselves vary from one culture to another, and in particular between local francophone and anglophone cultures.

Such a course would need to move from an external view of culture to an internal view - looking at how cultural positions are internalised -, and contribute to developing the student translator's self-knowledge. Notions from American standpoint theory (Wood 1993) could provide a starting point for helping students develop insights into how their personal, cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds contribute to their own sense of cultural values. This process of "bringing home" cultural reflection is an important condition for a non-hegemonic practice of translation. Culture is easily attributed to the "Other", especially within the dominant anglophone culture.

The second core course would examine the social, political, economical and institutional dimensions of inter-linguistic communication in the Canadian/Québec context. A wide-range of intercultural communicative interactions occur across Canadian society, whether translation needs

have been identified, or provisions made for translation services. Beyond a market approach, such a course would focus on a broader identification of intercultural mediation, before examining the existing private and public provisions for services, including the legislative framework for translation. In this latter respect, the Canadian situation is highly complex. While one can point to the federal Official Languages Act, legislation on the translation services or bilingual requirements can be found in a motley of other federal, provincial and municipal laws and regulations, not to mention organisational policies in health care and education. To speak only of the Toronto area, the Hospital for Sick Children, for example, employs cultural interpreters working in more than sixty languages, and the Toronto Metropolitan School Board has a linguistic and multi-cultural policy. The City of Winnipeg has by-laws on bilingual services. Beyond legislative requirements, companies may or may not have official linguistic policies.

Students need to acquire an understanding of how language policy is formulated (or not) in both the public and the private sector, and what cultural, social, political and economic forces, discourses and perceptions operate against and in favour of the provision of inter-cultural linguistic services. This would also involve learning how to assess needs, determining what services could best serve these needs, exploring a range of responses from translation to non-translative or partially translative-based ways of managing intercultural contact and communication, and evaluating their effectiveness. Case studies would facilitate a critical analysis of the many invisible seams between translation, bilingualism and unilingualism. To name only a few, in the area of client services, in both the private and public sectors, bilingual services are increasingly provided orally, but notes for files or gisting are done in one language only (more often English). In the public sector, translators or other employees may be asked to gist into English reports of claims submitted in French, since the processing is carried out only in English. Bilingual judges and journalists routinely translate as part of their professional duties.

At stake here is developing an understanding of the socio-cultural function of translation within a culture of respect and mutual reinforcement. When we are translating into French in Ontario, we are contributing to francophone cultural identity, and linguistic reinforcement, creating a sense of shared community through language. At the same time, the very act of translation is (or should be) a demonstration of a commitment to guaranteeing recognition of French. A better understanding of the socio-cultural functions of English-French translation in minority francophone milieu (Acadie and la francophonie ontarienne) would also assist students with socio-linguistic choices, and help them negotiate their role in the on-going “construction” of a written linguistic norm (Dubois and Leblanc 2003: 125).

Within the present text-based curriculum, the social function of translation from French into English often appears more elusive to students. Faced with translating requests for service (or complaints) from francophone clients into the majority language for treatment by unilinguals, they may focus unduly, and disrespectfully, on text issues in the source language (does the text conform or not to certain linguistic norms). The importance of such translation for ensuring equal access to services, and how this access might be improved are unclear.

Such a course would necessarily examine issues related to the protection of cultural diversity. To be most effective in creating an ethical translative interculture among translation professionals, the course might be given to both francophone and anglophone students in the same class (Canadian programs tend to separate students in each linguistic streams). At the same time, the course content and pedagogy would have to be designed in a way that acknowledges the cultural differences between groups. On the English side, particular attention would need to be paid to nurturing an understanding of inter-cultural ethics and respect. Canadian anglophones do not always readily comprehend the need for legislation related to *aménagements linguistiques*. On the francophone side, the course would look carefully at issues related to how translation can be a vehicle both for equal access to services and indirect assimilation, and what kind of practices strengthen the former function and reduce the latter. Such a course would enable students to see the areas where legislation has provided a rampart for the protection of cultural rights, yet at the same time explore areas where such rights are still not recognised and where, as active inter-cultural agents, they could become advocates.

## **Cultural vs text criteria in the design of translation courses**

A cultural turn in curriculum would also have implications for the design of practical translation courses. As Marianne Garre makes the point with respect to translation texts on human rights, the socio-cultural functions of texts are not to be confused with text types and discourse types (2001: 69-100). Nonetheless, the need to rethink the content of practical courses in cultural terms could, I believe, be reconciled with certain aspects of current courses in general and specialised translation. One might think of grouping texts whose primary social function was informative vs texts with more complex cultural roles. Alternatively, one could envisage breaking down inter-cultural practices within a particular field: i.e. medical texts including research gists vs pharmaceutical posology texts or texts with a quasi judicial function. Using socio-cultural criteria to rethink our standard groupings of courses by general or specialised fields might well improve students' text translative performance, and contribute a new perspective on the old debate on sequencing between general and specialised translation courses (i.e. which are easier for the translation learner).

Within this restructuring, it would also be useful to redefine translation performance to include, but not be limited to, competence in text production, and to rethink our course levels in terms of increased requirements for inter-cultural as well as text competence. Not all inter-cultural communicative functions require the same skill levels as text translation. A pro-active approach to defining student performance could be developed. Students would be encouraged to go beyond the text, move back to the situation, and develop scenarios for improving feedback on translations, communication with users, and an analysis of best service provision. Assignments could include inter-cultural field work.

## **The Pedagogical Turn**

My work teaching translation theory to students from three multi-cultural linguistic groups (francophone, anglophone and hispanophone) suggests that culture also plays a role in pedagogy (2002: 115-117). To use some of the education terms taken on by Robinson in *Learning to be a Translator*, certain cultural groups may be more accustomed to analytic-reflective pedagogical approaches vs impulsive-experimental (1997: 80), externally or internally referenced learning styles (1997: 81), relationship driven vs content-driven styles (1997: 65). Varying cultural definitions of the boundaries between the self and the other can also impact on how students carry out and benefit from certain types of assignments. North-American-educated anglophone and francophone students generally react very positively to engaging personally with readings through a translator's journal. However, this may not be a productive assignment for students coming from more discreet, collectivist cultures, or for whom the division between the private and the public is less permeable. A predominance of competitive vs collaborative attitudes may also determine the success of group projects or other peer-learning exercises.

Making the socio-cultural turn in pedagogy would not be complete without considering ways of creating an inclusive classroom where cultural and other forms of difference are validated within an ethics of respect. From this point of view, how inter-cultural communication functions in the classroom, what values the pedagogue presents through his or her own doing and saying, are closely related to how successful the translation program is in helping students to appropriate a code of inter-cultural ethics. On this question, translation pedagogy would benefit from research in the field of communication ethics. In an article appropriately entitled, "Embracing Diversity in the Classroom", Josina Makau, for instance, offers a succinct analysis of various pedagogical strategies to create a "safe, constructive learning environment" (1997: 59). Going beyond the need for tolerance and safety, Makau argues for a celebration of the richness of diversity: "responsive and responsible pedagogy inspires the will and capacity to engage in ethical dialogic interaction across differences" (1997:63).

## Conclusion

While the need for a socio-cultural turn in translation curriculum and pedagogy derives from contemporary theories of translation, making the turn is not without profound implications for theorising translation and the future of translation studies. In her insightful article, “The Emergence of the Teaching of Translation”, Cay Dollerup concludes that “Teachers of translation have not invented translation theory (or better: ‘Principles for and Factors in Translation’), but they have forced it to take a firmer stand” (1996: 29). Her point is that the increasing need to teach translation, i.e. to train translators, has contributed to generating and testing theories of translation. Certainly the task of explaining and instructing that underlies the pedagogical experience means that teachers of translation are admirably placed to work out the ramifications of theorising translation. Speaking as a self-reflective pedagogue, she suggests the importance of “a meta-understanding which makes it possible for each of us to define our roles in relation to both our students and to our preferred theories a little better” (1996: 30). Both remarks highlight the special role of the classroom as a dialogical space where theory and practice meet on several levels: within the student’s practice of translation as he or she seeks to apply theoretical concepts, within the discursive exchanges between student and teacher, and within the teacher’s own reflections on his or her theorising of translation practice.

In James Holmes’ mapping of translation studies, however, translation pedagogy and translator training are solidly anchored on the applied vs the pure side of the discipline. In the consolidation of translation studies in recent years, this positioning has been reinforced, at the same time as the divisions between theory vs practice and academic vs professional have been accentuated. As Gideon Toury observed in 1991, and his comment remains pertinent, while Holmes was aware that his presentation of the discipline may have been “flat”, the question of the “(inter)relations -- existing as well as desired -- between the various branches and their sub-branches [is] a topic which has rarely been taken up in any serious way ever since” (1991: 180-181). One of the most fruitful implications of a socio-cultural turn in translation curriculum and pedagogy, in my opinion, would be to re-establish these (inter)relations, and more specifically to re-weave the ‘map’. It is perhaps because of this special status as a space where theory and practice necessarily meet, no matter how imperfectly, that the translation classroom may well function as a symbolic and real forge, not only in re-uniting theory and practice, and in creatively stimulating the transformation, but also in providing the energy for propelling translation forward in its role in intercultural agency and ethics.

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