

Why translation conventions should be intercultural rather than culture-specific. An alternative link model

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Christiane Nord has stated that translation conventions are culture-specific. I want to argue that if they are, they shouldn't be; they should be intercultural. Further, I think I can show that Nord has already discovered this, even if she hasn't said so. But first let me explain why the point should be of more than philosophical importance for the ethical, pedagogical and historiographical dimensions of translation studies as an interdiscipline.

The culture-specific principle is important

Christiane Nord is a very good translation theorist who works within the general principles of *Skopostheorie*. At the 1990 FIT congress in Belgrade she announced her interest in the historicity of translation conventions: "Whenever we claim that a certain text 'must be' translated in such and such a manner, we are subject to a culture-specific convention". I want to call this the "culture-specific principle", without entering into any fine distinctions between "conventions" and "norms" as the specific content concerned (what I have to say could just as easily address "norms"). Nord has further developed the culture-specific principle in a 1991 article in *Target*, which is the main text I shall be citing here. In both places she correctly posits that translation is not just one thing and that people translate differently according to different historical parameters. This is supported by several observations: sixteenth-century Spanish translations could be twice as long as their originals whereas this is no longer the case today; German translators usually do not adapt foreign names whereas Spanish translators frequently do; and so on. It is thus posited, observed and concluded that translation conventions are culture-specific.

This principle has far-reaching consequences. As Nord emphasizes, cultural specificity must be linked to the ethics of translational practice, since if a culture expects the use of one set of conventions the translator is responsible for either using those conventions or making known any deviation from them. Readers should not be deceived. Such is the target-end dimension what Nord calls the translator's loyalty (1991b:94-95). It is an ethics not of convention for convention's sake, but of making explicit any deviance from convention.

The same ethics of explicitness should then underlie the teaching of translation

conventions. As Nord points out, if translation conventions are culture-specific then our teaching must also be culture-specific, since we are conveying conventions even when we are not conscious of them. We are doing implicitly something that would be more ethical if done explicitly. This is one of the reasons why, according to Nord, “it would be a great help to future translators to have an exact description of the regulative and constitutive conventions of translation for the source and target cultures they are working with” (1991b:107). Once again, the purpose of the exercise is not to impose certain conventions as absolute rules; it is simply to make explicit something that is currently implicit.

But how are we to locate and describe these translation conventions? Nord identifies several possible sources of information, including comparisons of translations, translation criticism and theoretical statements (1991b:103-106). The list could perhaps have benefited from a more dynamic model of transgression (most conventions are actually invisible until broken, and only then achieve theorization), but what interests me here is that Nord has in fact elaborated both a procedure and a finality for the historiography of translation. She has told us not only what sources are available to the historian but also why the historical description of translation conventions could be of importance to current professional and pedagogical concerns.

So we find that the premise of culture-specific conventions can provide fundamental orientations for the ethics, teaching and historiography of translation. It is a very powerful interdisciplinary principle. In fact, it seems so pervasive that it makes the more general and universalistic *Skopos* propositions look like rather self-evident lowest common denominators. Here we could be dealing with something stronger, potentially like a highest common factor.

But is Nord’s principle the best one available?

The culture-specific principle is an unfalsifiable hypothesis

Although expressed as an initial premise for further deductive operations, the culture-specific principle is actually justified in Nord’s texts as a powerful hypothesis *induced* from certain limited observations and then applied to the areas we have just seen. I have no quarrel with the observations themselves, nor with the applications. But I am worried that the one-way inductive use of the observations quickly jumps to a level of generality that makes the hypothesis unfalsifiable (a similar methodological problem is fleetingly recognized in Holz-Mänttari 1984:162). This is dangerous because induction is by definition able to move from correct observations to false conclusions. Let’s see how this jump works, and how its conclusions might be opposed to some equally viable alternatives.

Nord observes that convention K exists in culture A but not in culture B. She hypothesizes that K is culture-specific, but all she has really *observed* is that it is not universal. Her methodology seems not to recognize any categories between the universal and

the culture-specific. So what will happen if further observations show that K also exists in cultures C, D and E? Nord will say that K is specific to those cultures; indeed she will say that those cultures are really just one culture for the purposes of discussing K (Nord's "culture" is a technical term whose boundaries need not correspond to the cultures we think we live in). But what then if K is found in all observable cultures except culture B? For Nord, K must still be culture-specific, because here the term "culture-specific" really means non-universal. Moreover, since the very definition of conventions specifies that they "are subject to more or less gradual change and can be replaced by a new convention whenever the need or wish arises" (1991b:96-97), it is strictly impossible to imagine a universal convention. So all conventions are by definition culture-specific, since we have no other term with which to describe them. The hypothesis cannot be wrong.

We might note in passing that a similar kind of tautology operates on the level of the *Skopos* principle that "a translation is determined by its purpose". This has deductively been accorded the status of a law, becoming a universal of translation simply because a possible culture B which did not recognize it would not have anything we recognize as being translation. The principle thus becomes unfalsifiable by virtue of its very generality, since an activity that was not determined by its purpose could then not be called translation (in fact it could not even be called an action). So on both the relativist and universalist levels, these approaches proceed from tautologies.

The way to avoid unfalsifiability on both the relativist and universalist levels is to develop categories incorporating the variable extension of the observations themselves. That is, if K is found in culture A and only in culture A, then it can be hypothesized as strictly culture-specific for as long as it fails to turn up in a further associated culture. But if it is also found in the contiguous cultures B, C and D, then it is strictly more than culture-specific, although not necessarily universal. We might then say that K was "transcultural" (if there is evidence of movement) or perhaps "multicultural" (if not), and we could proceed to describe its actual extension in the time and space of human history, hypothesizing its existence for each culture under analysis but then *testing* its existence in a wholly falsifiable way. The testing of such hypotheses should moreover enable us to decide if K is transcultural/multicultural in the sense of appearing in an intersection along the borders of cultures or as a union of cultures forming some larger homogeneous unit.

However, this same kind of testing should also reveal a third kind of relationship in which certain conventions not only appear in several cultures but also actively interrelate other conventions appearing independently in the individual cultures concerned. To take a political example, whereas a convention like having a symbolic head of state might belong to a certain European transcultural formation (in this case more of unions than intersections), a convention like recognizing reciprocal political sovereignty is qualitatively different in that it actively interrelates other conventions (heads of states) without assuming their homogeneous union (the intercultural convention works no matter whether the heads of state are symbolic

or dictatorial). A convention like reciprocal sovereignty would then be properly “intercultural” in that it enables a set of quite different cultures to interrelate. It would not operate from within any one culture, nor from a level of lowest common denominators, but from artificial conventions that allow individual cultures to define themselves and to determine their relations to other cultures.

If the purpose of translation is the active interrelating of cultures, it would be fair to suppose that translation conventions should be properly intercultural in the above sense, rather than merely culture-specific or even just transcultural or multicultural. Further, since it is very rare for entire cultures to be engaged in the business of intercultural relations, translation conventions should probably be hypothesized as existing in privileged intersections (where translators and other intermediaries are aware of K) and not necessarily extensible to whole cultures or their unions (it does not follow that all readers are aware of K).

It is not my purpose to pursue this line of reasoning here. For the moment, I am more interested in the reasons why Nord’s approach seems to overlook the kinds of hypotheses and categories that I have just outlined. Why can she see no levels between the culture-specific and the universal?

Translators belong to intercultural communities

I think the key here lies in Nord’s explicit assumption that the translator is a figure “who is always acting within the boundaries of a particular culture community” (1991:94). This statement is supported by no observations. As such, it would appear to have been deduced from the universalist *Skopos* principle. And in the context of Nord’s text the culture community in question would appear to be more on the receiving or target side than anywhere else, since translators’ conventions apparently have to be shared with their readers (the same assumption was once common in system-based approaches). If it is universally true that translators work “within the boundaries of a particular culture community”, then it should follow that the conventions informing their work also lie within the same culture community. So the culture-specific principle would appear to depend on the translator belonging to one culture or another. However, if the locational assumption is *not* universally true, can the principle be maintained as formulated?

I suggest that many observations contradict the axiomatic location of the translator within the receiving culture. The most serious observations concern cases of cultural imperialism, where translators often belong to a dominant source culture or are subject to the conventions of that culture. For example, given that numerous Spanish laws controlled the duties and treatment of indigenous interpreters in the American colonies from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which particular boundaries were these translators within? A theory that axiomatically aligns all translators with their target cultures is likely not to see a good

many quite pernicious intercultural relationships.

My argument could also feed on rather more mundane observations. For instance, I remember one of my students in Barcelona complaining that our translation school “wasn’t for Spaniards” since most of the students were from bilingual or trilingual backgrounds (usually combining German or French with Castilian and Catalan). Similarly, my own university education as a student in Paris, where I translated myself into French, had almost nothing to do with contacting French natives; or again, in Cambridge Massachusetts, the community of foreign students had relatively few contacts with Americans. These are examples of intercultural communities. We could even find another example in the translator-teachers attending our own international conferences, all prepared to talk about and understand various translation conventions in one form or another, all of us with at least one foot outside the boundaries of the cultures we were born into. And if our feet stand on more than one culture, our heads are here in an intercultural community. None of us can wholly identify with the people for whom we teach or produce translations.

There is also a logical argument to be made against the location of translators within target-culture boundaries. Since the very nature of translation is to cross and to change cultural frontiers, competent translators must be able initially to straddle those frontiers. If not, they would be unable to carry out the movement from one side to the other. I suppose one could argue that translators should work like good spies, able to infiltrate foreign cultures without compromising loyalty to their own. Indeed, in the course of history, several peace-time translators become war-time spies. But many also become double agents, and lot more turn to exile. Once again, the hypothesis best suited to the nature of translation - and thus initially the most probable - is that translators are not *within* a culture but work in the intersections or frontier zones between cultures.

Yet another logical argument supports this position. As we have seen, Nord admits that translators can change existing conventions. But if they are located *a priori* within a culture community, how can they ever gain the necessary conceptual distance even to think about changing conventions? The simple inclusion of elements within sets is unable to explain change on this level. And yet Nord admits change. Something is wrong.

The problem is that Nord’s methodology precludes any possibility of finding translation conventions that are *not* culture-specific or that might have a properly intercultural causality.

Interculturality depends on an alternative basic link

Followers of Hans Vermeer will probably object here, with justification, that a sufficiently subtle functionalist theory can handle all the problems I have posed. This would be done through the variable categories of paracultures, diacultures and idiocultures, each of which is only defined with respect to the particular situation in which one uses the terms (Vermeer 1989:35-37). I understand this approach as allowing A to tell B something like: “We share

some common cultural elements (a paraculture), yet we belong to different sectors of that common set (diacultures) and we each have our individual cultural elements (idiocultures), so in this mosaic of shared and non-shared values we can communicate and yet remain distinct.” Fair enough. These terms can indeed incorporate conventions with different social and historical extensions. But if we look closely at them, we find they merely extend or reduce the notion of “a culture”, which is itself ultimately considered coextensive with a society (the basic spatial term conjugated in Vermeer’s description is *Gesellschaft*, giving *Gesamtgesellschaft* for the space of paracultures and then *Individuum* for idiocultures, presumably as a negation of the other categories). These terms thus multiply and divide “a culture”, spatially identified with the central concept of “a society”. There is no specific dimension for intersections that might give conceptual priority to translation rather than to individual cultures. There is no qualitatively distinct level corresponding to intercultural conventions. In fact, what looks like a theory of translation turns out to be a theory of cultures.

Does this make any difference? I admit my point is not immediately obvious. But perhaps it will be clearer if I put it another way, as another mode of conceptualizing basic translational links.

We know that most translational acts can be seen within a chain of translational acts linking more than one culture:

. . . Culture A, Tr, Culture B, Tr, Culture C, Tr, Culture D . . .

The vast majority of twentieth-century approaches to translation take as their minimal link the movement from culture to translator to culture, no matter which side the translator is presumed to be on:

. . . Culture A, Tr, Culture B . . .

Some theorists think a revolution has taken place just because we nowadays look more at B than at A. But we are actually using the same basic link as the one underlying the previous approaches that focused more on A. There has been no radical modification of the traditional analytical geometry. And within this traditional basic link, conjugations of different types and levels of cultures can happily prolong or restrict the traditional points of departure and arrival, saying how much of A is shared or not shared with B. In so doing, they plaster over the specific position of the translator. Hence my mild complaint. However, if the translator’s position is hypothesized as being intersectional rather than within any particular culture, we can approach the same extended chain from the perspective of an alternative minimal link:

. . . Tr, Culture A, Tr . . .

This simply means that instead of starting and ending with cultures, the basic link pertinent to translation studies could start and end with translators. The space of any translation convention K must first belong to the intercultural community formed by translators and other intermediaries along and around the limits of A. I suppose one could call this space a broad “diaculture” formed by multiple cultural fringes, a composite of complex intersections or corridors. But to do so would be to miss the major conceptual consequences of selecting an alternative point of departure.

My idea here is calqued on an example explained by Kuhn (1987:12-15). It seems that when Volta produced the first battery, his cell or basic link was the union of two different metals, with wet blotting paper separating the cells. But the modern battery, which works on the same operative principle, has the two metallic poles at the ends of each basic unit, with water in the middle of each cell rather than separating cells. Volta’s model corresponded to an electrostatic view; the modern model began as a chemical theory. Although a battery can be thought of in both ways, the concepts allowed by the chemical theory were necessary for the invention’s later development. That is, there were two ways of carving up the same basic phenomenon, but one way allowed developments that the other did not.

Does our reordering of categories help us locate translation conventions? If we look closely at the discovery procedures recommended by Nord, I think we find that the pertinent data immediately concern different translators rather than different cultures. Whereas traditional analytical approaches will look at source-side contents and then compare them with the target side in order to decide what kind of translation strategies could or should be used, Nord’s methodology asks us first to compare the opinions and procedures of different translators, as expressed in their translations, criticisms or theories. The starting point is not a culture but a small intercultural community of professional intermediaries. This is one reason why Nord appears to have discovered the interculturality of conventions, even if she doesn’t have the words to express it.

But my basic-link model could not be said to formalize Nord’s approach. Most importantly, it does *not* allow comparisons between translators to jump indiscriminately over centuries or to select random differences from widely separated lands. The hermeneutic function of “culture A”, which was once necessary as the source of elements for comparison, is now restrictively to locate the translators that can enter into comparison. The translation conventions we deal with must be associated with the one intercultural space, manifesting a certain spatiotemporal contiguity appropriate to the level of the convention concerned. The basic-link model cannot condone a direct comparison between translators in sixteenth-century Spain and those in twentieth-century Europe (where is the contiguous culture A?), which is of course going to find radical differences and thus assume a rupture. If Nord had used basic links to compare sixteenth-century Spain with translation practices in the same country in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, she might have found a progressive control

over the use of amplification and abridgement (Round forthcoming:159-160). And if she had compared it with fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy, she would have appreciated that the reason for these changes, the motivation behind Spain's apparently specific translation conventions, was the gradual *intercultural* influence of Italian humanism (Russell 1985). Nord's specific reference here is to Fernández de Madrid's translation of Erasmus, which was about twice as long as the original. But one perhaps need look no further than Erasmus himself to find another extremely expansive translator, prepared to submerge his 1516 Latin version of the New Testament in a mass of commentary. And if one looks at the inspiration behind Erasmus, one finds the expansive philological translation strategies elaborated by the Italian Lorenzo Valla (Hermans 1992:107). Such are a few of the links that could be pertinent to conventions that were intercultural rather than culture-specific. By all means let us compare translators and translations. But if we want to use inductive methods to locate the actual extension of conventions, we cannot indulge in the Arabic sand and Inuit snow and Indian elephants characterizing relativist teachings. Our comparisons must be constrained by the reasonably contiguous interculturality written into the alternative basic-link model.

To use translators as the points of departure and arrival of such a hermeneutic process is thus partly to confirm and constrain something already implicit in Nord's approach. However, this confirmation does not allow us then mechanically to attach translation conventions to any one culture, since we have started from the initial hypothesis that translators live and work in the intersections between between cultures.

More generally, our reversal of the traditional basic link means that instead of using knowledge about cultures to answer questions about translation, we could be using knowledge about translation to answer questions about cultures. We could study "culture A" by looking at the translations that enter and leave it. Instead of repositories of first and last words, cultures could then be seen as major translational crossover points, each with certain bonds of belonging, but all methodologically subordinate to processes of translation. And the origins of each culture, no matter how gloriously specific they might seem, should be found in translation from an interculture.

This approach is far-reaching in its consequences. But its initial epistemology is rarely understood. I have filled up a good part of a small book (1992) with parallel expressions gleaned from economics (functionalism studies use values; I want to study exchange values), discourse analysis (everyone studies source and target discourses; I want to study translation as a discourse in itself) and negotiation theory (political scientists have long studied the systems between which negotiations take place; I am interested in negotiations themselves as conditioned by "regimes" or principles of interrelations). These are different expressions of the same fundamental shift in outlook from systems to processes, from repetition to change. Theoretical consequences can be pursued in all these directions, just as the practical consequences should be worked out in the pedagogical and historical dimensions affected by Nord's culture-specific principle. But here, given the modal "should" in my title, let me

finish with a brief consideration of the ethical dimension of translation conventions, since it is here that Nord has most clearly discovered interculturality.

The ethics of translation are for intercultural translators

Nord believes that the culture-specific status of translation conventions means “there will never be a common translation code for all cultures” (1991b:92). This is like saying that since a few countries have used different systems for television transmission, television transmission systems are and always will be universally culture-specific. I think this is excessively pessimistic, to say the least.

Happily, Nord cannot believe in her own relativist conclusion on this point. After all, her very call for explicitness is presented as an intercultural ethical principle. One could go further, basing a whole ethics of explicitness on the reader’s right to information, a right found not only into the European Charter but also in the preambles to the ethics of several professional translators’ associations. So Nord’s relativism is not absolute. In fact, what she says about explicitness could equally be said about relevance, or indeed any well-founded precept for ethical communication (good candidates can be found in Gadamer, Habermas and Grice). But what concerns me here is not really the ethical principle itself (explicitness is problematic in that translation is an almost wholly implicit discourse). I am more interested in the space in which it is assumed to be operative.

Let’s go back to the beginning. Why does Nord believe “it would be a great help to future translators to have an exact description of the regulative and constitutive conventions of translation for the source and target cultures they are working with”? Why only for translators? Why not for the readers within an entire culture, since they are also supposed to be using the same conventions? And why should translators need to know about the translation conventions of their *source* cultures, since they are theoretically supposed to have both feet firmly planted in target cultures? Despite her limited categories, Nord is pragmatically aware that translation conventions first exist among translators themselves, and that this space is intercultural, concerning both source and target sides, since translators truly belong to both. And she must therefore be aware that translational ethics are not culture-specific but concern the intercultural profession formed by translators. If not, why should she have presented her principle in intercultural milieux like the FIT congress or an international journal of translation studies, in English? Surely she was addressing the same intercultural community as the one that should be working towards a common code of translational ethics?

This is what Nord has revealed in her actions but has not said in her texts.

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