

Literary translators as cultural brokers

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Abstract

By following the spread of a scientific term from one field of science to another present paper discusses the role of literary translators from a new aspect.

The term cultural broker was first used in the study of culture to refer to people who mediate between different cultural identity groups. It was then introduced in interpreting studies to apprehend the role of community interpreters. In summing up the skills characterising the activity of cultural brokers in both the study of culture and interpreting research we could note the following features: (1) their work is more than pure language or information transfer; (2) they actively influence the mediation process; (3) they are initiators; (4) they are supportive; (5) they work as co-ordinators; (6) as mediators they are reflexive; (7) they facilitate cross-cultural interaction; (8) they are motivated, tolerant and unbiased; (9) they recognise culture-specific attitudes; (10) they are aware of the given communication context they work in. The present paper explores how active and significant the work of literary translators is in the interaction between the source and target cultures. Finally a proposal is made to deploy the term cultural broker in translation studies to describe the work of literary translators.

1 Introduction

In contemporary scholarship researchers often face an interdisciplinary task when several disciplines reflect the same social phenomena. In such cases different fields of science borrow from each other and introduce hitherto unknown concepts. Thus due to some shared core features of a certain concept central to a specific field of science, scholars from another discipline consider it useful to borrow and integrate this new concept in their own research. Often scholars borrow both the concept and its verbalised expression (lexeme) which denotes the particular concept (Fóris 2005). If the term is taken over from another language, there are several possible options to apply. The most direct way is to introduce the loan translation of the lexeme into the scientific discourse, referring to the source of borrowing when first mentioned. It is also important to give a clear definition of the term when it is first introduced in the scientific discourse of the target language. Another possibility is when translators or researchers of the scientific field decide to create their own target language expression to denote the concept in question. In this case, however, they are expected to define the new term very precisely, at the same time referring to any possible deviations from the original definition of the concept accepted and used in the scientific discourse of the source language (Fóris 2005).

There are several situations that may lead to the borrowing of new concepts in a given field of study. This, however, has its origin in a specific context. By following their

fellow-researchers' previous work and by summarising their conclusions, scientists often reach new results determined by the context of their own work. This could finally lead them into previously unknown areas of scholarly study. In this paper I follow the path towards such a discovery. I present how a term moves from one field of science to another, progressively adding features to the concept it describes. On the one hand I intend to track the term **cultural broker** as it moves between different fields of science; on the other hand I aim at introducing this term to the field of literary translation research by summarising the characteristic features denoted by the concept of cultural broker.

This proposal is based on my own research experience in the field of translation studies. By analysing Hungarian and English translations of contemporary Finnish poetry and by studying the role of translators in the translation process I came to the conclusion that the term cultural broker used in the study of culture grasps the mediating role of literary translators very precisely. The term can be borrowed from this field due to the similarity of the social roles to which it refers. My conclusion is finally formulated on two levels of reflexivity. It is based on the author's own experience as a translator of contemporary Finnish literature, and on observations made while doing research in the field of poetry translation.

In the following I will examine the definitions of the term cultural broker in different fields of science, and discuss the motivations which lay behind the decision to borrow the term from other fields.

2 The Concept of Cultural Broker

The scientific requirement to define a certain sociocultural role encouraged the formation of the term **cultural broker**. By studying the definitions of the term used in different forms of scientific discourse the following technical definition may be given: cultural brokers are individuals mediating between two different interests. Their role is emphatically active, influential, supporting, reflexive and context-sensitive. The term of cultural (culture) broker and cultural brokerage has been so far used in certain fields of the study of culture (e.g. cultural anthropology, folkloristics) and translation studies (namely interpreting research).

In the present paper I propose to introduce the term of cultural broker to literary translation research. By using the term, so far previously latent areas of the literary translator's role as mediator may be revealed.

3 Brokers – Basic Interpretation in Economics

The use of the term has its origin in the field of economics. "A **broker** is a middle man acting between a client and a market maker – a broker will charge a commission for his services" (Market Terminology). Among the characteristic features of the concept

mediating activity, the active and contributing role of the mediating person may be highlighted. These highlighted features of the role of brokers inspired British social anthropologists to borrow the term to describe specific social roles.

4 Study of Culture

4.1 Brokers in Social Mediation – Social Anthropology

Frederick George Bailey used first the term **broker** in 1969 to describe a social role. In his opinion people who mediate between two hierarchical political systems may be called brokers. Based on the type of hierarchical relationship Bailey distinguishes brokers from pure messengers. Brokers have a wider scope of authority; their activity is more complex, they are responsible for and may influence the process of mediation. (Wadensjö 1992: 28.) In 1971 Robert Paine made a distinction between brokers and go-betweens, depending on the character of their activity. Brokers are more independent and supportive than go-betweens. (Wadensjö 1992: 29.)

To sum up I may conclude that social anthropology considered the term ‘intermediary’ as a higher category divided into two sub-categories: that of the go between and the broker. The latter is characterised by a more influential, independent and active role.

4.2 Brokers in Cultural Mediation – Folkloristics

Folklore researchers added the adjective ‘cultural’ to the expression of the term ‘broker’, refining and concretising the social role the mediator plays. In a thematic issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* Regina Bendix and Gisella Welz (1999) published papers of a German-American conference which discussed the social role of **cultural brokers** and **cultural brokerage**. German and American folklorists study the features of this mediating role in different social contexts. They begin from the standpoint that in contemporary society knowledge and cultural production is an ongoing process which can be maintained solely by cultural marketing and brokerage. Individuals who work in cultural institutions and mediate culture for potential consumers in a comprehensible and perceptible way are called ‘cultural brokers’. Consequently in their activity they mediate an ever-changing and dynamic knowledge, incorporating the demands of the target group consuming the cultural product. Their social role is characterised first and foremost by reflexivity.

Folkloristics also considers researchers of culture as cultural brokers.¹

4.3 Brokers Mediating between Cultures – Intercultural Communication

Researchers of intercultural communication also use the term cultural broker. Judith N. Martin and Thomas Nakayama quote Peter Adler, who claims that multicultural

members of a society who at the same time live in two cultural realities may become cultural brokers, and with their activity may facilitate cooperation and conflict management between cultures (Martin – Nakayama 2000: 138). In the last chapter of their book Martin and Nakayama define the basic features of successful intercultural communication: (1) motivation (2) knowledge – self-knowledge, linguistic knowledge (3) attitudes – tolerance for ambiguity, empathy, impartiality (4) behaviours and skills (general and culture specific) (5) understanding of communication context (Martin – Nakayama 2000: 317-320). The effectiveness of the roles discussed here (such as social mediator, institutional culture mediator, researcher of culture, community interpreter, culture organiser, literary translator) is very strictly dependent on the successful communication between two different interests. I consider it important both to highlight these features at this point, and to refer to them when describing the role of literary translators at the end of the present study.

5 The Use of the Term in Hungary

In the field of the study of culture in Hungary it was György Szelják (2000) who first used the Hungarian loan translation of the English term **cultural broker (kulturális bróker)**. While studying the tourism of central Mexico he widens the scope of the term used by American folkloristics. In his interpretation cultural brokers are the local Catholic mestee elite living in small towns of central Mexico who realised that European tourists visit the region not only for the spectacular landscape and tranquillity, but are also interested in the everyday life of indigenous people. Thus they invested in developing local tourism, at the same time playing the role of local mediators between the two (European and indigenous) cultural codes. Szelják highlights the importance of reflexivity that enabled the local mestee elite understand the situation. Zsolt Szíjártó (2002) then used the term following Regina Bendix's definition. He studied the tourism of a smaller region at Lake Balaton (the Káli basin) and considered the qualified official touristic experts employed in small villages of the region as cultural brokers. Bertalan Pusztai (2007) again widens the concept of cultural broker adding further features to its definition. Studying the communities of the Southern Hungarian Plain he claims that after the change of regime (1989-90) the elite of a given settlement try to develop their communities both on real and on symbolic levels. In the course of this they apply and interpret (real or symbolic) development ideas seen elsewhere for local communities. They act as cultural brokers and are active members of these communities, at times motivated by the determination of a missionary. They sense global processes which they then interpret into local solutions for their communities.

We can see that Hungarian researchers of culture took over the term of cultural broker in a loan translation (*kulturális bróker*) and used it in the way American folklore researchers defined it, in some cases adding further features to the original definition.

6 Translation Studies

6.1 Brokers in Oral Language Transfer – Interpreting Research

Cecilia Wadensjö (1992) introduced the concept of **broker** in interpreting studies when discussing the role of community interpreters. In her opinion in the course of community interpreting it is a mutual interest of primary communication partners to get into contact with one another, but they do not intend or have the abilities to initiate direct communication. In this case they look for or accept the assistance of a mediator. As for the mediating role of community interpreters it could be argued that they are simultaneously translators and coordinators, often also patronising and safeguarding the people for whom they interpret. Roda P. Roberts (1997) speaks about **cultural brokerage** when discussing the activity of community (also cultural) interpreters. The role of the community interpreter is active, assisting, safeguarding, at times also reconciliatory. While in other types of interpreting cultural mediation is only one aspect, in community interpreting this is the accentuated aspect. Sylvia Kalina (2002) calls community interpreters **cultural brokers** referring to their activity as going beyond linguistic mediation.

6.2 Brokers in Written Language Mediation – Literary Translation Research

Having summed up the main characteristic features of cultural brokers as a scientific term used in the study of culture and interpreting research, now I propose to use the term of cultural broker also in translation studies while describing the role of literary translators. My proposal is based on the similar role that literary translators play in cultural mediation.

It is not without example in translation studies to refer to literary translation as practical work, besides considering it as an artistic type of activity. These approaches usually highlight that literary translators are expected to adjust their work and strategies to the wider context of the target community and target culture. André Lefevere goes so far as to claim that the only fruitful approach in the research of literary translation can be nothing but sociohistorical. We should not study how words are joined on the paper, but we should answer the question why they are joined in that particular way. Therefore we should reveal what social, literary and ideological considerations lead translators in their mediating activity (Lefevere 1992: 81). The dynamic and constructivist understanding of culture deployed also in translation research (Kóbor 2007) no longer sees culture as a static and closed entity delineated by sharp borders, but considers it as an ever-changing knowledge. Consequently we should interpret both source and target culture of a translation process reflexively. In this process, translators themselves create both the source and the target culture by mediating between the two. I may take one of the central questions of translation studies (i.e. the translation of culturally bound expressions) as an example to demonstrate how this new approach may alter previous interpretations. Thus we should not consider the translation of culturally bound

expressions as a problem to be solved by providing different recipes, but we should see it as the meeting point between two, living and ever-changing cultures. These meeting points also become parts of both cultures.

In the course of the mediating process discussed above I consider it important to reinterpret the role of translators and to describe their scope of activity and role in a more precise way. Therefore here I propose to introduce the term **cultural broker** in translation research when describing the role of literary translators. Summarising all the characteristic features given in the definitions of the term listed above I regard it as justified to also use the term to describe the role of literary translators.

Cultural brokers

- do more in their work than pure language mediation or information transfer
- are responsible for and may actively influence the process of mediation
- are initiators in their activity
- may become supporters and promoters (at times also patrons) in their work
- sometimes work as co-ordinators and protectors
- conduct cultural mediation in a reflexive way, adjusting their activity to the interests of the target community
- may facilitate cross-cultural interaction and conflict management
- are motivated, tolerant, empathic and unbiased in their activity
- recognise culture-specific attitudes
- are aware of the specific communication context they work in

Interpreting the role of literary translators from this aspect follows Lefevere's approach described above in the research of literary translations. Studying translators' strategies in this context may lead to new scientific conclusions.

7 Summary

In this paper I have followed the route of a scientific term – **broker/cultural broker** – from one field of science to another. As a starting point I defined the term broker used in economics. British social anthropology borrowed this term from the field of economics to denote a social role. Then American folklore researchers took the term supplemented with the adjective 'cultural'. In their definition they stress the cultural character of the mediating activity defined by social anthropology. Then researchers of intercultural communication and community interpreting borrowed the term in a meaning similar to this interpretation. Hungarian culture researchers introduced the term in its loan translation in Hungarian scientific discourse.

In a conclusion I proposed introducing the term cultural broker to literary translation research, in order to further define the role and scope of activity of literary translators in

the process of cultural mediation. A detailed illustration of this role with concrete examples could form the basis of further research.

¹ It is worth mentioning that classical fields of the study of culture (anthropology, ethnology, folklore research) use the term **translator** to describe the role and activity of cultural researchers.

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