

# Cultural aspects in the translation of texts in the domain of information technology

## 1. Introduction

Translation studies is no longer limited to a purely linguistic approach. The importance of cultural implications for translation is increasingly emphasized and experts have been highly interested in cultural aspects, especially in the field of literary translation as many publications of the 1990s show (Snell-Hornby 1995; Toury 1995; Hatim/Mason 1997; Hatim 1997; Nord 1997; Bassnett/Lefevere 1998). Bassnett/Lefevere (1998: 132) even claim that translating can be defined as an “intercultural transfer”.

When compared to literary translation, technical translation is usually considered to be free from cultural information. Technical texts are thought to be mainly informative and addressed to an international discourse community that share the same knowledge and values. Nearly 20 years ago, Newmark (1988: 151) stated that technical translation is “potentially [...] non-cultural, therefore ‘universal’”. However, he also specified that it is far from “actually non-cultural”. Since then, the importance of culture for technical translation has greatly increased especially in the field of information technologies (IT). Nowadays, the users of these technologies are a large and varied group that cannot be labelled solely as subject experts. Technical knowledge is no longer restricted to the workplace and has become part of our daily lives. This fact is reflected in texts and therefore affects the process of translation. Many of the translations concerning this domain are not addressed exclusively to a specialized audience but to the general public. At present, there are many IT magazines

published for readers who cannot be described as theoretical experts belonging to an international community but as sophisticated computer users from a language community located in a geographical area at a specific time. Moreover, the social and cultural background of the writer or the country of publication exert a strong influence on how technical information is provided.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse several examples of technical translations that illustrate the way in which the information is adapted to the cultural background of the new audience. The source texts are selected from *Byte*, a computer magazine published in the United States; the target texts correspond to its European edition in Spain. The articles found in this American computer magazine usually present a new product, which is compared to others in the market and both its advantages and disadvantages are taken into account. The main purpose of these articles is informative and the text type is expository. The intended reader is a computer user that knows quite a lot about these machines and is highly interested in the constant innovations brought about by technology, but this prototype reader is neither a theoretical expert nor an intellectual belonging to an international discourse community<sup>1</sup>.

The examples selected make clear the need for cultural adaptation, as the intended audience are European Spanish speakers. From a theoretical point of view, the functional theory of translation, also known as the theory of *skopos* (Reiss/Vermeer 1991/1996) and relevance theory (Sperber/Wilson 1986; Gutt 2000) provide a sound theoretical basis to justify the adaptations exemplified in this chapter.

## 2. A brief overview of technical translation

Technical translation refers to the process of translating those texts belonging to what are called specialized languages and is usually clas-

1 Some of the linguistic features of *Byte* articles, which classify them as a specific genre of computer discourse, are discussed in Posteguillo (1996).

sified along with other varieties such as legal translation, scientific translation or the translation of medical texts. But an exact definition is a moot point. For a well-known expert like Newmark (1988: 151), technical translation is distinguished from other forms of translation by the presence of terminology. In a recent study of technical translation by Gamero (2001: 23), the key feature is the type of texts this form of translation deals with, technical texts. However, it is sometimes difficult to specify which texts to include under that label. On the one hand, the difficulty stems from the real meaning of the adjective “technical”<sup>2</sup> which does not imply the same in “technical terms” and “technical texts”. While “technical terms” can pertain to every subject field, “technical texts” are usually identified with those related to engineering. On the other hand, technical texts include many types of discourse and many genres, which are continuously being created<sup>3</sup>. This constant emergence of new genres is evident in the IT domain where a great variety of “cybergenres” has appeared.

### 3. The theoretical framework

Functional theories of translation, which have been so successful in the German context, are not totally new. As early as 1974, Nida and Taber talked about “dynamic equivalence” which represented an important development from the previous notion of formal equivalence. In later works, Nida emphasized the importance of the target reader and the cultural aspects involved in translation. Nevertheless, his theories were strongly influenced by Chomsky and his approach to language.

- 2 For a thorough discussion on the usage of the adjectives “technical” and “scientific” for qualifying language or texts both in Spanish and English, see Álvarez de Mon (2001).
- 3 Gamero (2001) distinguishes 30 different genres for technical translation in German.

Later, other linguistic theories such as Halliday's systemic functional grammar also influenced translation theorists who became attracted by the communicative approach. Hatim/Mason (1990: 10) distinguished three dimensions for the translation process: the communicative, the pragmatic and the semiotic dimension.

But for translation specifically, the functional approach corresponds to what is known as *Skopostheorie*, which was developed by Reiss/Vermeer (1991/1996). For these authors, translation is not simply a linguistic activity but a human action and the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose, *skopos* in Greek, of the translation action. As Vermeer (2000: 221) explains:

Any form of translational action, including therefore translation itself, may be conceived as an action, as the name implies. Any action has an aim, a purpose [...] The word *skopos*, then, is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation. [...] Further: an action leads to a result, a new situation or event, and possibly to a "new" object.

To that idea of purpose, Nord, also a functionalist, adds the notion of "loyalty", which she describes as the "responsibility translators have toward their partners in translational interaction" and, as she explains, "loyalty means that the target-text purpose should be compatible with the original author's intentions" (Nord 1997: 125).

The implications for translation of the functional approach seem also to coincide with the explanations<sup>4</sup> on the process of translating provided by the application of Relevance theory (Gutt, 2000). Relevance theory (Sperber/Wilson 1986) is an attempt to elaborate on Grice's maxim that most human communication is the expression and recognition of intentions, presenting at the same time a cognitive core which is central to all human communication efforts. When people communicate following the principle of relevance they achieve the most benefit for the least cost, being the benefit the effect on the receiver and the cost, the amount of mental processing required. Applied

4 Gutt (2000: 203) makes it clear that his relevance-theoretic study of translation intends to explain "how the phenomenon of translation works. It does not constitute or advocate a particular way of translating".

to translation, this means that the translator must take into account the readers' assumptions in order to achieve the same effect as the source text. This perspective is especially attractive for translators and with it the importance of cultural knowledge comes to the fore. As Gutt (2000: 238) himself states translators

[...]realize that language differences are only one of the barriers that stand in the way of communication across languages; the other, and sometimes more formidable, barrier is that of differences in contextual background knowledge.

#### 4. Cultural problems in technical translation: the Spanish version of *Byte*

The analysis of the source texts and the target texts used in this study reveals that cultural problems can be grouped into four categories:

- The presence of the American way of life and real events that are closely linked to the development and changes in computer technology in the United States.
- Politeness and stylistic features that are different in Spanish technical articles.
- Specialized terms which have different connotations in the target language.
- Source language metaphors that do not have an exact equivalent.

The examples chosen belong to different sections of these articles, which are clearly affected by cultural implications. Firstly, headlines; secondly, the sentences in the articles whose purpose is to exemplify and clarify the information given by means of examples based on the cultural reality of the source reader; thirdly, the sentences in which the writer involves the reader. Finally, some lexical and terminological problems derived from the different use or connotations of the terms in English and Spanish are considered.

#### 4.1 Headlines in articles

Headlines in articles can be compared to titles in books as they make clear the importance of cultural differences. For the literary genre, Nord (1990: 153) states that titles of books illustrate both the need and the possibility of a functional translation. Titles are independent units of meaning and closely linked to factors such as the time, the place or the purpose of the message of the source text. Besides, titles are highly conditioned by the effect they should produce on the audience, and therefore they should play a specific role in the target culture. In technical magazines, the effect they produce is especially important because the headline functions as a sort of decoy that draws the reader's attention towards the article. In the following example (Example 1), the translator does not maintain the original headline because it is not appropriate for the new audience.

##### Example 1

Source Text	Target Text
When will E-cash jingle in your e-pocket? Already successful in Europe, e-cash is hitting the U.S. – with answers and questions	<i>En Europa ya funciona... ¿y en EE.UU.? El dinero electrónico suscita preguntas y respuestas en los Estados Unidos, mientras que en Europa ya funciona satisfactoriamente</i>

For the European readers of the target text the question in the source text, *When will E-cash jingle in your e-pocket?*, would be irrelevant as electronic money is already in use in Europe. For that reason, the translator has chosen for the first sentence of the headline a question that could attract a European reader who can feel curiosity about the idea that Europe is ahead of the United States in technology, *Already in use in Europe; What about the U.S.?* The second sentence restates and explains the question making the topic explicit, *E-cash raises questions and answers in the U.S. while in Europe it is already working satisfactorily.* For the Spanish reader, the informative interest lies in the unknown future of electronic money in the United States. In this way, the technical translator acts as a mediator and facilitator of the informative content and therefore plays the role of writer or even editor of the target text (Cabré 1999: 188).

#### 4.2 Different cultural reality

In technical texts it is possible to find references to the culture of the source text. In literary translation, these *culture-specific items*, as Franco Aixela (1996: 70) calls them, can be eliminated from the target texts or, otherwise, they can be explained in a footnote. But footnotes are neither common in *Byte* nor in similar publications; therefore, these cultural references are usually adapted or eliminated as in the following examples.

In example 2, the author of the ST supposes that the reader can visit New York and experience its way of life. The European readers of the target text may know about Manhattan but probably they would not feel included by the proposal of buying a paper or a hot dog since it is not probable they will visit New York in the near future. The changes carried out by the translator can be justified from a functional perspective. The statement in the target text fulfils the same rhetorical function as the imperative in the ST: to convince the reader of the advantage of choosing New York as the first city to try e-cash in the States. Few Spanish readers would feel involved if the text were to suggest this unlikely individual experience: *intente comprar un periódico o un perrito caliente en Manhattan con un billete de cincuenta dólares*. This would not be a successful way of achieving the communicative purpose. However, a generalising sentence restricted to those who have already visited the city would also sound adequate for those readers who may feel the appeal of visiting New York some time (Example 2).

##### Example 2

Source Text	Target Text
It shouldn't come as a surprise that the first major U.S. trial of electronic cash is taking place in New York City. <u>Try buying a newspaper or a hot dog in Manhattan with a \$50 bill</u>	<i>No es de extrañar que los intentos más serios para implantar el dinero electrónico en los Estados Unidos se estén llevando a cabo en la ciudad de Nueva York. <u>Cualquier persona que haya estado allí sabe lo difícil que resulta conseguir un periódico o un perrito caliente con un billete de cincuenta dólares</u></i>

The translation proposed (backtranslated from Spanish: 'anyone who has visited New York knows how difficult it is to buy a paper or a hot

dog with a fifty dollar note') includes only those people that have visited New York and therefore results more appropriate for a European audience. Finally, the shift from Manhattan to New York as the place where the hot dog or the paper is paid for is highly suitable following relevance theory. For the Spanish reader, New York "is" Manhattan and the choice of a smaller geographical context only would be required if there were other boroughs such as Brooklyn or the Bronx also mentioned in the text.

## Example 3

Source Text	Target Text
While trials are just beginning at the U.S., approximately 50 e-cash systems are already operational around the world	<i>Aunque en Estados Unidos las pruebas no hayan hecho más que empezar, en el mundo ya funcionan aproximadamente 50 sistemas de dinero electrónico. <u>En España, por ejemplo, ya conocemos las tarjetas monedero del sistema Visa Cash, adoptado por numerosas entidades bancarias como la Caixa y Caja de Madrid</u>, y los modelos 4B y Euro6000, impulsados por la filial europea de Mastercard</i>

Example 3 presents a situation similar to the previous one, but solved inversely. In this case, the translator adds new information, which is relevant only for the reader of the target text. For a Spanish readership, the information in the source text would be too general and therefore it could even lead to wrong conclusions as it is not sufficiently updated for the target reader's background knowledge. For this reason, the translator considers it relevant to add some information concerning the systems used in Spain. In this way, the target text fulfils the same informative purpose as the source text and provides information congruent with the general knowledge of the target reader.

#### 4.3 Different writer and reader's involvement

*Byte*, in its original version in English, is characterized by an informal style that is generally achieved by the explicit presence of the writer and the reader in the text. However, Spanish expository writing favours an impersonal style. Therefore, in the Spanish version of *Byte*,



neither the writer nor the readers are present in the text in an explicit manner and informality is attained by a different strategy: the use of informal and colloquial words.

There are several reasons for the different involvement of the writer and reader in the source text and target text. Apart from Spanish expository style, the translation process itself contributes to impersonality. The translator does not comply with the strong statements of the original author and being only a mediator of the writer in the transmission of the source text information prefers to be less direct. Impersonality also derives from a linguistic feature of the Spanish language, which does not require subject pronouns in front of verbs.

## Example 4

Source Text	Target Text
Here's why today's PCs are the most crash-prone computers ever built – and <u>how you can make yours more reliable</u>	<i>Algunas razones que explican por qué los actuales PC son los ordenadores más proclives a las averías...y <u>algunos trucos para mejorar su fiabilidad</u></i>

In example 4, the literal translation of “how can you make yours more reliable”, *cómo puede hacer el suyo más fiable*, does not conform to the more impersonal style of technical articles in Spanish where explicit mention of the reader is usually avoided. For this reason, the translation proposed is successful. The Spanish word, *trucos*, which in this use could be paraphrased as “skilful ways to solve a problem”, implies a reference to the target reader since the reader would be the one to apply those *trucos*. Besides, the Spanish word *truco* is also equivalent to the English word “trick” and thus it brings to the target text the colloquial flavour of the source text maintaining at the same time the technical purpose of explaining how to solve a problem<sup>5</sup>. Besides, the choice of the Spanish word *truco* by the translator supposes that the target reader is an expert or at least skilful enough to carry out the action successfully. The definition of the word in the

5 Frequently, the articles of *Byte* include a section under the heading of “Tip” where the reader can find a useful way to avoid the negative consequences of a certain action or an explanation of how to solve specific problems. This section is equivalent to the “Troubleshooting tables” typical of “Instruction Manuals”.

Spanish dictionary makes clear those connotations of skilfulness acquired through practice and time. The Spanish dictionary (*DRAE*, 2001) defines the word as *cada una de las mañas o habilidades que se adquieren en el ejercicio de un arte, oficio o profesión*<sup>6</sup>.

## Example 5

## Source Text

## Target Text

Readers of <u>my column</u> know that <u>I'm wildly excited</u> about the uses of HTML-aware e-mail and conferencing.	<i>Los lectores habituales de esta revista se habrán percatado de que <u>existe un gran revuelo</u> alrededor de las posibilidades del correo electrónico y los sistemas de noticias con soporte HTML</i>
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Again the more impersonal style of the Spanish version of *Byte* is revealed in example 5. Now, it is the writer who is the one that is left out of the target text. Firstly, “my column”, is translated as *esta revista* to avoid the presence of the original author, as the Spanish edition is not an exact version of the whole magazine and does not always include the same sections as the original. Secondly, the translator avoids the first person pronoun in “I’m wildly excited” by using an impersonal expression, *existe un gran revuelo* – something like ‘there is a great commotion’ or ‘a great stir was caused’. This translation successfully transfers the two main features of the source text expression “wildly excited”: the reference to an emotional state and the familiarity of the writer. *Revuelo* implicitly conveys the verbal process of feeling an emotion as its definitions show. The Spanish dictionary (*DRAE*, 2001) defines *revuelo* as *turbación y movimiento confuso de algunas cosas* (‘disturbance and confused motion of some things’) or *agitación entre personas* (‘stirring of people’). The word implies the idea of emotion or excitement of the English expression but now it is not a personal feeling of the writer but a feeling of a group of people. In journalistic language, the idea of causing *revuelo* is nowadays a very popular stylistic device used in order to emphasize the importance of something.

#### 4.4 Terms in the source text with a different range of use and different connotations in the target text

In specialized languages, terminology plays a key role and designates a concept or an object that is known across different cultures. However, new terms are not created out of nothing; more often than not old words receive new meanings. Consequently, when used in a text, specialized terms are not always free from the connotations of that word in the general use and writers play with that usage, and these connotations are not easily transferred to the target readers<sup>7</sup>. In the texts analysed, it is possible to distinguish two types of terms that reveal these cultural problems. They can be domain specific terms as in example 6 or metaphorical expressions used by the author as in examples 7 and 8.

##### Example 6

Source Text	Target Text
But ADSL remains vulnerable to rival technologies in the single family-home, because incumbent <u>telcos</u> control the local "copper loop" where their own DSL equipment would be located.	<i>Sin embargo, ADSL sigue siendo vulnerable en el terreno de los edificios unifamiliares, donde las <u>compañías concesionarias</u> controlan <u>el tendido</u> en el que debe colocarse el equipo DSL.</i>

In example 6, two specific telecommunications terms "telcos" and "local loop" have been avoided, as their presence in the target text would cause confusion for the Spanish reader. "Telco" is a truncation of *telephone company*. In Spanish, a similar abbreviated term *las telcos* is already being used but its meaning is broader as it refers to any telecommunications company, not only telephone companies. Even the expression *compañías telefónicas* would not be adequate in Spanish. *La (compañía) telefónica* was the name of the only Spanish telephone company working in the country until a few years ago. Consequently the use of this expression to refer to any telephone company does not seem appropriate. For that reason, the solution *compañías*

7 For a detailed account of many of the problems of computer terminology and its translation into Spanish see Aguado (1994/1996)

*concesionarias* ('licensed companies') manages to convey this general idea of any telephone company.

Concerning "local loop", "loop" is the term used to refer to the subscriber's line, that is, the telephone line that links the subscriber's telephone to the central exchange. Consequently, the translation chosen *tendido*, which could be paraphrased as 'those lines that are laid out', is suitable as this is the physical realization of the telephone lines.

Recently, in the Spanish news about the liberalization of local calls, the term "loop" was literally translated by *bucle*, but except in this case, in the field of telecommunications, the usage and connotations of the word *bucle* make it unsuitable for the Spanish reader of *Byte*. Besides, in Spanish, the collocation, *bucle de cobre*, is not used at all. *Cobre* collocates with the superordinate *cable* and the usual term is *cable de cobre*.

Cultural problems in the translation of *Byte* into Spanish also come from the use of metaphors in the source texts. These metaphorical expressions, rather than being created by the writer of the article, are lexical metaphors used in order to obtain a more attractive prose and a brighter style. As they do not have an equivalent in Spanish the translator frequently chooses to omit them.

#### Example 7

Source Text	Target Text
No other technology has taken our Web-driven world by storm the way Java has	<i>Ninguna otra tecnología ha conmocionado tanto este mundo, obsesionado con el Web, como Java.</i>

The metaphorical expression "take the world by storm" in example 7 is not created by the writer, but could be described as a lexical metaphor as it is possible to find it in a general purpose dictionary such as *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1995). In Spanish there is not an exact equivalent metaphor reflecting this idea of success by means of a physical phenomenon like a storm. Thus, the Spanish translator prefers to express the metaphor differently and uses a verb that implies a personal feeling *conmocionado* ('shocked').

A similar solution is the one adopted for the translation of the term “driven”. This participle also refers to a physical process and makes the reader imagine a world controlled or guided by the Internet. However, the translator has preferred to express the great importance of the Internet by using a verb that describes its effect on people. The world is *obsesionado* (‘obsessed’). These two examples show that now it is the Spanish text, which is more personal as the translator prefers to use verbs denoting emotion instead of physical processes.

## Example 8

Source Text	Target Text
Enter message-based queuing (MBQ), middleware for different applications to share store-and-forward transactions with each other, sending <u>the intermediate steps</u> of the transactions <u>back and forth</u> via messages. <u>It's a delicate dance</u> – decrementing an item in inventory before the purchaser's credit has been checked is probably not a good way to go –but MBQ is close enough to real time that scores of businesses are checking into it anyway	<i>Aquí entra en juego la cola basada en mensajes (Message-Based Queuing o MBQ), un middleware que permite que diferentes aplicaciones compartan el almacenamiento y envío de transacciones, transmitiendo los <u>pasos intermedios</u> mediante mensajes. Se trata de un <u>asunto delicado</u>, ya que retirar un artículo del almacén antes de comprobar la disponibilidad de saldo o de crédito no parece una buena idea, pero MBQ es lo suficientemente parecida al tiempo real como para que las empresas estén tomándola en consideración.</i>

Example 8 also shows the preference of the source text for visual metaphors that the Spanish translation omits. In the target text there is a more neutral style focusing mainly on transmitting content. The target text maintains the expression “steps”, *pasos*, but does not play with its meaning of “dancing steps”, conveying only the meaning of “stage”. As the target text does not translate “back and forth”, the allusion to a dance is lost and for that reason the “delicate dance” turns into un *asunto delicado* (‘a delicate matter’).

## 5. Conclusions

It is important to stress that technical translators working in the field of information technologies have to face several problems that deal with cultural aspects, which traditionally were not typically considered as characteristic of technical translation.

Among the main cultural aspects that affect the translation into Spanish of the magazine *Byte* we can mention the following:

- American customs and way of life that illustrate technical developments.
- Different information content adapted to the interests of the new target audience, as technology does not reach society at the same pace and in the same way in Europe and the US.
- Stylistic conventions specific to the target community as Spanish expository writing does not favour the explicit involvement of the reader
- Fossilized metaphors typical of the source language which do not have an equivalent in the target language
- Different connotations that English terminology has in Spanish. In order to translate successfully, IT technical translators need to know about the technology and the society of the language community of the writer or the publication, the textual characteristics and stylistic conventions of the specific genre being translated, the background knowledge, the norms of politeness and the expectations of the target audience, the words, expressions and metaphors typical of the language community of the writer of the source language and their equivalence in the target language and, of course, the specific terminology and also its variations in usage and its connotations in the target language.

Consequently, translators “become experts in cross-cultural communication” (Pym 2000: 182) and act as intercultural mediators who do not

merely translate<sup>8</sup>. If technical translation is seen as intercultural mediation, the translator is allowed to adapt the source text to satisfy both the publisher and the target reader. As stated in Nord (1997: 86) when referring to the changes carried out when translating technical texts, the following words of Sager (1993: 113) should be given attention:

Any modification of a text is carried out in the perceived interest of an improvement of the text as part of a specific message. It involves making texts more effective for and in a particular communicative situation.

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8 This intercultural mediation is even more important in the IT domain, in what is known as software localization.

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