

## Modes of Translating Culture: Ethnography and Translation

Carmen Valero-Garcés

Volume 40, Number 4, décembre 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002805ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/002805ar>

[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

Valero-Garcés, C. (1995). Modes of Translating Culture: Ethnography and Translation. *Meta*, 40(4), 556-563. <https://doi.org/10.7202/002805ar>

### Article abstract

The fields of Translation and Cultural Studies can be seen as encircled within an interdisciplinary framework with fluid boundaries. Focusing my attention on the phrase "the translation of cultures" I will try to explore different meanings of the word "translation" the way this activity is performed, and by whom. My purpose is to analyze the role of both the ethnographer and the translator as interpreters of experience. I will try to deepen in the dilemmas of "relativism" and "manipulation" of information as a result of that evaluative discrimination they have to do and the current tendencies

# MODES OF TRANSLATING CULTURE: ETHNOGRAPHY AND TRANSLATION

CARMEN VALERO-GARCÉS

*University of Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain, and  
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA*

## **Résumé**

*La traduction et les études culturelles peuvent être vues comme faisant partie d'un réseau interdisciplinaire aux frontières mouvantes. En concentrant notre attention sur la phrase «la traduction des cultures», nous allons explorer différentes significations du mot «traduction», la manière dont cette activité est exécutée et par qui. Notre but étant d'analyser le rôle de l'ethnologue et du traducteur en tant qu'interprètes des expériences. Nous allons tenter d'approfondir les dilemmes de la «relativité» et de la «manipulation» de l'information comme résultat de cette discrimination évaluative qu'elles doivent faire et dégager les tendances actuelles.*

## **Abstract**

*The fields of Translation and Cultural Studies can be seen as encircled within an interdisciplinary framework with fluid boundaries. Focusing my attention on the phrase "the translation of cultures" I will try to explore different meanings of the word "translation," the way this activity is performed, and by whom. My purpose is to analyze the role of both the ethnographer and the translator as interpreters of experience. I will try to deepen in the dilemmas of "relativism" and "manipulation" of information as a result of that evaluative discrimination they have to do and the current tendencies.*

The translation of culture has become since the 1950's an almost banal description of the distinctive chore of social anthropology. Geodfrey Lienhardt's paper "Modes of Thought" (1954) is one of the earliest examples of the use of translation to describe a central task of this discipline. He uses the word "translation" to refer not to the linguistic matter but the problem of describing others from a different culture. In this context "to translate," in fact, is a synonym of "to convert," and the meaning is closer to "to change" or "to exchange."

On the other hand, one who translates is said to express in one form what has been written or previously expressed in another. Under this concept translation as expression is linked as well to the explanation and interpretation of meaning. This adds a social dimension to the understanding of other cultures and faces us with the role of the ethnographer as translator. I will argue that the role of the ethnographer and the translator are quite similar. Both interpreters, the first of experiences and notes, the second of a given text. Both facing a large disposal of sets of possible responses in his / her own language. And both attached to a certain degree of subjectivity.

My purpose is to analyze the role of both the ethnographer and the translator as interpreters of experience. I will try to deepen in the dilemmas of "relativism" and "manipulation" of information as a result of that evaluative discrimination they have to do and the current tendencies.

Let us start with some considerations on the importance of the written text in Western culture. Orality and Literacy are two different recognized ways of expression. But even today we hold some of the beliefs about the nature of language and its function in society which were held by the men of letters in charge of either educating the natives

or justifying the education of the natives in the process of "colonization." The colonization of Latino America can be an example. These men of letters in the 16th century were surprised that the natives did not have "the alphabet" (Mignolo 1992: 3). Because of this they called the natives "barbarians" as writing was considered a higher stage than speaking. Their conception of language was based on an evolutionary writing at the end of which the alphabet was waiting. According to this idea Castilians were able to build a pedagogical, administrative and philosophical apparatus based on their conception of language and of a hierarchy of human beings with respect to their possession of alphabetic writing. Such a conception is related to the belief in Western culture that alphabetic writing is intrinsically superior to any other writing system. But this tyranny of the alphabet was going to be of crucial importance; firstly, for the colonization of the New World and other cultures with oral tradition; secondly for the understanding of culture.

It is obvious that each language presents a system of conceptual patterns (rules for requesting, discerning, questioning, etc.) that have evolved over a long period of time, and each language has developed its own categories with its own style of expressing them. Therefore, the ethnographer as the experiencer of the culture has his / her own style, which makes translation — taking the term in its widest sense — much more difficult than for the native. That means that the translator works with the concept of language not as an isolated manifestation of human activity, but as a polysystem (Even-Zohar 1979), that is, the language system as part of the complex system of human manifestations we know as "culture." Gellner says:

Language functions in a variety of ways other than "referring to objects." Not every utterance is an assertion. There are many things that language-in-use does, and is intended to do, which explains why we may respond positively to discourse that may seem inadequate from a narrow "logical" point of view. The functions of a particular language, the intentions of a particular discourse, are of course part of what every competent ethnographer tries to grasp before he can attempt an adequate translation into his own language. (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 146)

This comment recalls our attention to the formation and break up of ethnographic authority as a consequence of the redistribution of colonial power in the decades after 1950 and the emergence of new cultural theories of the 1960's and 1970's.

It was a period of changes in all sciences and the times when the consideration of Translation as an independent science from Linguistics made possible the publication of relevant works (e.g. Vinay and Darbelnet's *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* (1958), Nida's *Towards a Science of Translating* (1964), Catford's *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965), or Alexander Ljudskanov's (1962) *Traduction humaine et traduction mécanique*). Since then the appearance of books, journals, magazines, announcements of conferences or meetings is growing and growing and more specific fields of research are considered. We talk about "Translation Studies" in a general sense but we could distinguish among Theory of Translation, the Teaching of Translation, or Translation Criticism. Such a diversity of disciplines and publications and the struggle for showing clear boundaries among them suggest that the question of "relativism" affects not only Ethnography, but also Translation, and by extension, these sciences dealing with language as "language" is not only a set of signs different from one language to another, or Translation is not only dealing with Linguistics or Ethnography with Anthropology. These sciences involve communication by means of language. And this is only one of the great number of cultural manifestations human beings can produce. Both activities involve translation, and translation is, following Toury (1980: 15) "the communication of verbal messages across a cultural-linguistic border."

Mikhail Bakhtin (1953) used the term "heteroglossia" to define the idea that languages do not **exclude** each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways. This suggests an ambiguous, polyfacetic world with no boundaries and independent cultures. And the inevitable reality of a cross-cultural representation which implies all the vicissitudes of translation. In the case of the ethnographer, it requires participant observation, this involving arduous language learning, some degree of direct participation and conversation, and often of confrontation of cultural expectations.

In both cases, the ethnographer who wants to write down his / her experience, and the translator of a given text face language problems. They have a large series of possible meaningful sentences, including in this concept the idea of context and textual relationship, in their own culture. And before they take the final decision, there is an intermediate step, an imaginary unreal "third stage" in his / her mind which could mediate between the native culture and his / her own. In the case of the translator we could call it "methodological invariance" — hypothetical construction over some aspects of the source text (ST) that functions as an intermediate stage in the comparison between this one and the translated text (TT).

In the case of the ethnographer, this step could be explained as the central point in which both cultures (the new one, and the ethnographer's one) meet when writing, although it is difficult to specify certainly at which level or which points of contact are established. The next step will be the process by which the collected information is placed under the parameters (*e.g.* behavior, concepts, description, contexts, etc.) of the new culture. In this process, both the translator and the ethnographer have to choose and that evaluative discrimination is always a matter of selection. This selection is not necessarily "good" or "bad" but, in most cases although not necessarily, it implies relativism. This problem connects with the idea of how to understand cultural translation, how persons in cultural translation understand some things and not others. By studying these facts, we can provide descriptions of why they will not, they can not understand one another, talk to each other, etc.

At the same time we must recognize the existence of different levels of speech production and reception — (we will be in the threshold of what the anthropologist calls the *ethnography of speaking*). That means that both the ethnographer's and the translator's translation are not merely a matter of matching sentences in abstract. Nothing has meaning in isolation and any cultural event is produced in context, and the context may be determined by some external facts. The ethnographer may meet with problems rooted in the linguistic materials he / she works with or he / she has produced from his / her research, but also in the socio-political, even economical conditions he / she works in the field and in his / her own society. He / she must be conscious of the "inside" and "outside" of events and a dialectic of experience and interpretation. This same dialectic applies in the translation of texts: external facts plus process of transfer.

As for the translator, he / she finds problems related to linguistic materials, but also some problems concerned the socio-economical and, in some cases, political conditions connected with the production of a new text. Firstly, he / she has to consider the role of the translation initiator (TI), that is, the entity or person who / by whom the translation of a text is initiated. He / she may determine the type of translation produced. The TI may be the author, his / her representative in the new polysystem, a publisher, the translator him / herself, the reader or his / her representative, etc., each one with a different grade of accessibility to the original text. We should also consider the TI's position in both economic and socio-cultural terms. The economic factor has a great influence on the work done with repercussions at every level (acceptability of translated text, accuracy to original text, time needed, money earned, type of edition, marketing, etc.). At the same time

the TI is subject to different and sometimes contradictory forces which are a reflection of his / her position in society in many possible senses (age, time, aesthetics, kind of relationship, etc.), and may be influenced by *all* the different motivations behind an act of communication to concentrate on one particular aspect of a message, asking for a very general translation to the TO, a summary or an adaptation. In short, the translated text may reflect the particular identity and motivation of the TI. In the case of the ethnographer, the research initiator (RI) may be an institution, him / herself, his / her own background, the government or entity he / she is working for, the economical conditions concerned to his / her project, etc., and the results may also reflect the RI's motivation and identity.

We should also consider the role of the translator (in its double sense, as translator of texts or as translator of scientific facts as it is the case of the ethnographer). This is a main factor not largely explored. Just some considerations will be enough to make us more aware of his / her influence in the text. Every translation (of an original text into a different language or a piece of ethnographic writing) is subject to a translational individuality principle and as such is basically an unrepeated event. The translator / ethnographer may have a greater or lesser degree of competence, but his / her work will also reflect an inevitable element of subjectivity or style which can be traced through certain lexical usages and syntactic forms, development of mannerisms or a certain approach to translating. That is, different reactions to the same text, or to the contact with reality. In Ethnography, current styles of cultural description are historically limited, but they are undergoing important metamorphoses as a consequence of the crisis of authority. Toury's comment on the kind of constraints that may affect translation could apply to ethnographic writing to:

In reality, translation — like any other behavioral activity — is subject to constraints of various types and degrees, including objective, relatively and absolute rules, on one hand, and fully subjective idiosyncrasies on the other.

However in between these two extremes there lies a substantial middle ground occupied by intersubjective factors, commonly designated 'norms', which constitute the main set of constraints on it [...] the existence of norms for a certain 'behavioural dimension' obviously presupposes a certain rate of *conformity* to them. However, this by no means implies that any single act of performance in this 'dimension' will in fact reveal the *same rate* of conformity, or any conformity at all to the norm in question. (1980b: 180)

In the case of the translator, it requires intellectual participation. That is, first, he / she is a reader, he / she experiments some feelings and reactions in a different culture according to some previous ideas, and goals. For transferring the text from one language to another, he / she must know not only the languages but also the cultures and will certainly evaluate some cultural differences.

In other words, society and its manifestations are not simply texts that communicate themselves to the reader. They need interpreters. These are people who speak with different voices, and through different patterns — not only by men, women, class, age, power, etc. — and can be affected by different conditions. These voices are in a context that can be "translated" to a different society. In this stage, Malinowski's (1958: 306) expression *context of situation* is made relevant. For him, *context of situation* 'indicates on the one hand that the conception of *context* has to be broadened and on the other hand that the *situation* in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression,' that is, the idea of context must be substantially widened beyond the bonds of mere linguistics and be carried over into the analysis of the general conditions under which a language is spoken. Thus, — as he remarks — the study of any language, spoken by a people who live under conditions different from our own and possess

a different culture, must be carried out in conjunction with the study of their culture and of their environment. As a result, the differences among the languages are one of the major problems that both the translator and the ethnographer face. Evans-Pritchard (1969: 215) was conscious of the problem of language, and the difficulty of translating cultures, as we see in the following example when talking about the social structure of the tribe he studied in *The Nuer* (1940: 32):

It is difficult to find an English word that adequately describes the social position of **diel** in a tribe. We have called them aristocrats, but do not wish to imply that Nuer regard them as of superior rank, for, as we have emphatically declared, the idea of a man lording it over others is repugnant to them.

Languages are different, and translations of culture or of a cultural manifestation (e.g. a novel) will be also different. The 'perfect' translation does not exist. Only more or less accurate — contextual — translations depending on some facts — facts concerning the ethnographer's work too. Some of them are: type of text (novel, poetry, scientific text, cartoons, subtitling, etc.), resources of the translator's language, translator's competence, readership intended, purpose of the translation, etc. In the case of the ethnographer, type of writing (autobiographic, dialogical, historical...), resources of his / her language / ethnographer's style, purpose of writing, or readership intended. As in the translation of a text by different translators, any continuous ethnographic exposition may contain a diversity of descriptions and transcriptions by a variety of indigenous 'authors.' The question is, how should these authorial presences be made manifest. In the case of the translation of a text, should the translator's style be made manifest in the translated text? The question sends us back to the current attitude of cultural relativism.

Another relevant element is the readership. This is an element not always taken into account. But the "product" of the translation — translation of culture or translation of a text into another language — needs a "consumer," a reader who is waiting to read about another mode of life and to manipulate the text according to established rules.

On the other hand the author has a style, he / she has learned some conventions and uses of the language that imply a choice. At the same time, the translation arises from the need to relate one's interest to that of another and to encode it appropriately. From this point of view translation involves not only the ability to speak in a particular polysystem, but the capacity to reshape one's thoughts and actions in accordance with accepted forms (linguistic materials, grammatical conventions, etc.). The ethnographer "reshapes" his notes and the translator "rewrites" an original text according to some social expectations. As Vicente L. Rafael (1988: 5) points out "social expectations are historically determined, so that the context within which translation can be said to occur is itself always shifting."

Different historical moments, different modes of writing, different fashions in thought, etc., those are elements reflected in the use of the language. In short, different discourses. But at this point we should remember that language is a cultural manifestation that can be fixed in a text, or, in other words, language is just a way of expressing culture.

James Clifford (1988: 93) establishes at least six ways in which ethnographic writing can be affected, 1) contextually, 2) rhetorically, 3) institutionally, 4) generically, 5) politically, and 6) historically. Those are the same elements that affect the work of the translator of a written text. The translator, before translating, has to study the original text in the context it was produced paying attention to the historical moment, society, author's life, style, as well as socio-economic factors which could have affected his / her work.

The ability to speak the language of a culture is not necessarily sufficient to bring this about. The translation of cultures requires one to try to understand other forms of life

as the translation of a text requires one to try to understand the original polysystem of the text to be translated. Renato Rosaldo (1992: 477) points out that cultures are learned, not genetically encoded. That means that they need to be decoded the same way a text in another language needs it too. An example could be to study children's language to find out what they learn to make them "members" of a culture. The ethnographer's writing could be another example of how to decode culture.

Another point that affects both elements can be mentioned: the question of relativism and subjectivity. Our century may be seen as preoccupied by meaning and identity through what we call "culture" and "language." Clifford (1988: 93) calls attention to the development in the early twentieth century of a new "ethnographic subjectivity." In his own words, this is composed of "participant observation in a world of 'cultural artifacts' linked to a new conception of language — or languages — seen as discrete systems of signs."

Considering that, the times when the "Lone Ethnographer" meets the object of his / her quest in a distant land (his / her "native"), next he / she does his / her fieldwork by collecting data, then he / she returns home and writes a "true" account of the culture; these times appear to be over. Neither we can talk of ethnographic writing as a mirror that reflects other cultures as they **really** were, and nor can we talk of a translated text as the **unique** possible translation. Culture is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitely interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal and emergent. The same applies to translation. The existence of different translations of the same text based on different theories of translations, and different times give evidence of this fact. So, production and reception of both types of texts constantly change despite the fact that, as written texts, they are fixed. But words are more than simple labels for specific objects.

Therefore an ongoing interdisciplinary program that has been transforming social thought is reflected and contributes to some changes in ethnographic writing and in Translation Studies. The classic period of the Lone Ethnographer and the period of the translator's unquestionable work has ended. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there began a process of disentangling and reworking that continues into the present. The potent historical conjuncture of decolonization and the intensification of American imperialism and the cold war led to the reorientation of many disciplines and a series of movements. As a consequence, ethnographic history, the translation of cultures and social criticism are intertwined as fields of study and their decisions affect the translators's task and the ethnographer's writing. This shift has produced in turn new perspectives in ethnographic writing and a rise in the consideration of Translation Criticism as an independent fieldwork in Translation Studies. Mary Louise Pratt (1986: 33) writes:

There are strong reasons why field ethnographers so often lament that their ethnographic writings leave out or hopelessly impoverish some of the most important knowledge they have achieved, including the self-knowledge. For the lay person, such as myself, the main evidence of a problem is the simple fact that ethnographic writing tends to be surprisingly boring. How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such boring books? What did they have to do to themselves?

And Wilss (1982: 217) made a clear comment on the key problems of Translation Criticism (TC):

TC has practised an encyclopedic approach, trying more or less plausibly to integrate a host of observations partly of linguistic nature, into a frame of reference which creates the impression on being rather hazard and therefore lacks persuasive power.

An expansive list of cultural studies leads some authors, as Clifford (1988: 3) points out, to consider that ethnography has become central to "an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon" of descriptive and critical cultural studies that includes fields from historical ethnography to cultural criticism and from the study of scientific or everyday practices to the semiotics of fantastic.

Renato Rosaldo (1992: 490) cites an eminent anthropologist's complain about the recent experimentation of the cracking of the discipline's authority, leading to its fragmentation and eventual disappearance. That anthropologist, Cora Du Bois — a retired Harvard professor —, pictures the reality as moving from a distinguished art museum (past) into a garage sale (present). This powerful image applies also to Translation Studies although I will evaluate it, agreeing with Rosaldo, rather differently than Du Bois. She feels nostalgia for the past and detests the chaos of the garage sale, and I find it provides a precise image for the postcolonial and recent communist experience crack showing that nothing is sacred, permanent, or sealed off, and in the field of the Translation Studies, the amazing number of publications, conferences, debates, etc., that become a piece of news day by day is an example of its diversity and fragmentation.

In short, the image of ethnographic writing and the activity of translating texts from one polysystem to another as a garage sale depicts our present global situation. The main task now is to find a way for defining its field. We can not "get on with the job" and pretend nothing has changed, nor waste our efforts wandering about meaning and producing more literature in the impossibility of ethnographic writing or objective translation. Ethnographers keep on writing and translators keep on translating. Interdisciplinary study and social analysis may be the next step for methodological and practical proposals as the most recent studies suggest.

Summarizing, the ethnographer and the translator of texts from one language into another are both translators. In the case of the ethnographer, he / she has to analyze and understand the culture, and then translate his / her notes into written texts. In the case of the translator, first he / she has to understand the author and his time and then translate the text into a different language. Both have to make some research, and both need to observe a certain amount of conditions — socio-economical, political, time of production, readership, etc. From a theoretical point of view, both should be bicultural not only bilingual. But the difficulty of putting this axiom into practice leads us to accept the relativism of the activity of translating transmitted through an apparent crisis of authority that only makes clear the relativism of their activity, without meaning the impossibility of being certain, but only the impossibility of a unique solution, considering the diversity of cultures and the uniqueness of the human being. That is, when could we say that one person is bicultural? In the case of the translator, it does not only depend on his / her knowledge and use of both languages, but also on the culture he / she has grown up in and the degree of adaptation as far as other external conditions; in the case of the ethnographer, it is much more difficult as he / she may have studied and lived in the new culture for only a short time although he / she may have theoretical methods that help in the conclusions, but again external conditions affect the result. Both of them are interpreters of experience, and they can never apprehend another people's, or another period's imagination completely as thought it were their own. In short, relativism and manipulation of information are present in the task of both translator and ethnographer. Both of them share a series of characteristics as practitioners of an activity that will never end: the activity of translating.



## REFERENCES

- CLIFFORD, J. and G. E. MARCUS (Eds.) (1986): *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- CLIFFORD, J. (1986): *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. (1940): *The Nuer*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- GEERTZ, C. (1983): *Local Knowledge*, Harper Collins, Basic Books.
- HOLETON, R. (Ed.) (1992): *Encountering Cultures. Reading and Writing in a Changing World*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- MALINOWSKI, B. (1953): "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", *The Meaning of Meaning. A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (Eds.), New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., pp. 297-336.
- MIGNOLO, W. (Ed.) (1992): *Rediscovering Colonial Writing*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press.
- PEREZ FIRMAT, G. (1989): *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- PRATT, M. L. (1986): "Fieldwork in Common Places", *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- RAFAEL, V. L. (1988): *Contracting Colonialism. Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press.
- ROSALDO, R. (1992): "Culture and Truth: The Erosion of Classic Norms", *Encountering Cultures. Reading and Writing in a Changing World*, Richard Holeton (Ed.), New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- TOURY, G. (1980a): *In Search of a Theory of Translation*, Tel Aviv, The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics.
- TOURY, G. (1980b): "The Translator as a Nonconformist-to-be, or How to Train Translators so as to Violate Translational Norms", *Angemandle Übersetzungsmis senschat*, Poulsen, S. A. and Wilss, W. (Eds.), Århus, Denmark, pp. 180-194.
- WILSS, W. (1982): *The Science of Translation*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr.