



The translation of texts in the tourist sector has received little attention in works on translation, despite illustrating a wide-ranging series of challenges for the translator. This paper addresses some of those challenges, most particularly those related to differing reader expectations arising from differing textual conventions regarding content and style.

# The translation of texts from the tourist sector: textual conventions, cultural distance and other constraints

*La traducción de textos del sector turístico ha recibido poca atención en los estudios teóricos de la traducción, a pesar del hecho de que estos textos ilustren una amplia gama de desafíos para la traducción. En este artículo se pretende plantear algunos de esos desafíos, y muy especialmente los relacionados con las diferentes expectativas del/la lector/a del texto de origen y del texto de término surgidas de las diferentes convenciones textuales en cuanto a contenido y estilo.*

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## INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tourism (in the widest sense) is a sector in which a great deal of translation work is carried out. It is often the case that visitors to a town, region or country receive their first impression is from a translation of some sort, be it a tourist brochure, an information leaflet, a sign, or a guide book. For many people indeed these may be the only occasions on which they come into contact with translated material in their lives. Yet, there is little reference to the translation of this kind of material in translation studies literature. We feel that the size of the market and the specificity of the communicative situation merit more theoretical consideration.

Let us look briefly at some of the few references there are. Newmark (1991, 1993) and Duff (1981) both make rather negative comments on the quality of translations in the tourist sector, mostly due to the fact that many texts are translated into one of the translator's foreign languages — a situation which Duff (1981: 125-6) sees as undesirable but inevitable given the market situation, and Newmark (1988: 7) puts down to national pride. (Newmark (1991: 20) also puts forward interesting proposals regarding the introduction of multilingual information at public places in the United Kingdom.)

It is generally accepted that the ideal solution is for translations to be carried out by professional translators working into their language of habitual use<sup>1</sup>, availability of professionals with the languages of habitual use needed may simply not be sufficient to make this possible. In this case, as Beeby (1996: 6-8) also believes, it is clearly desirable to have translations carried out by professionals working into one of their foreign languages. The

<sup>1</sup> We use here the term «language of habitual use» instead of «mother tongue» as preferred also by Newmark (1991: 21) to cover the various different circumstances of individual translators, and to avoid any suggestion of discrimination.

circumstances of the market we know best (southern Spain), however, are that much of the translation work is done by non-professional non-native speakers, mainly due to the rather scant recognition of the translation profession. As an illustration of this, hoteliers who cooperated in the organisation of a course held at Granada University's Translating and Interpreting Faculty in 1995 saw no need for professional translators to intervene at all, and all had the foreign-language versions of their leaflets, menus and so on produced internally. The poor quality and reputation of translations in the tourist sector is indeed the result of attitudes such as these. Although it is unfair to generalise and there are a few excellent translations around, the results of these attitudes have been widely discussed and, as Newmark puts it, «contribute greatly to many people's hilarity» (1991: 3).

At the Granada Translating Faculty we have opted to train our students in the skills needed to deal with tourist texts professionally and to familiarise them with both the market's attitude and with their own limitations, subscribing wholeheartedly Beeby's (1996) belief that these objectives are attainable. As the role of translation into the foreign language is not the subject of this paper, for the remainder of this paper we shall attempt to ignore the issue of translators' foreign language proficiency and deal with other more specifically translational aspects of the subject.<sup>2</sup>

To complete our brief selective review of some of the literature available on the subject, Nord (1991: 219-32) offers translations into five languages of an original (Bavarian) German text on local cuisine, and comments on how many of their shortcomings could be due

<sup>2</sup> The subject of translator competence and training for working into the foreign language has also been dealt with by Kelly (1992, 1993 and forthcoming) and Sánchez (forthcoming).



to lack of systematic analysis of the source text in its communicative situation, a point which we wholeheartedly subscribe. Jänis & Priiki (1994) offer the results of a small-scale empirical study into reader expectations among Russian visitors to Finland, an aspect again which we believe is worthy of further study, as does Nobs (1996), who identifies genre convention differences between German and Spanish tourist publications, a point we shall return to.

Let us now establish firstly what we mean by tourist text. For our purposes the tourist text is any text published by a public or private organisation of any kind intended a) to give information to any kind of visitor or b) to advertise a destination (city, hotel, restaurant, etc.) and encourage visitors to go there. This clearly covers a very wide range of text types, from brochures sent abroad to promote a particular destination through brochures available at the destination itself, tourist guides available in the tourist's home country, to menus, information brochures published by authorities responsible for monuments and other places of interest as written guides to them, conference programmes and other conference material, or police warnings regarding dos and don'ts for visitors. The subject matter covered is extensive and includes such highly specialised areas as architecture, art history, history, geography, meteorology, gastronomy, economics, sports, customs, music and dance, to name but some.

#### COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION

In the following we shall try to establish common denominators among these texts, starting with the communicative situations of the source texts and a comparison between them and the communicative situations of the target texts. Tourist texts as defined above fulfil basically two general functions<sup>3</sup>: informative and

persuasive or vocative, each of the two in varying degrees in different texts. This holds true for both ST and TT. The difference lies in the reader, and her experience and knowledge. Let us imagine a text written to promote tourism to the city of Granada. The information required by a Spaniard from Burgos regarding the city, given her knowledge and education partially shared with the ST author, is not as substantial as that required by a foreign visitor, all other things being equal, as we can fairly safely assume some basic knowledge of Spanish history. On the other hand, having that basic knowledge of history, it is probable that the Spanish visitor would like to receive more detailed information regarding specific events, places and people; this would probably constitute an information overload for the foreign visitor, who is only now assimilating the basic events, people involved and so on. That is, it is not simply a case of the foreign visitor requiring more, or more explicit, information, but also of the foreign visitor requiring that information to be dosified in some way to prevent an overload which could lead to a breakdown in communication. In this sense, as Jänis & Priiki (1994: 49) comment after Reiss & Vermeer (1984) and Neubert (1968), the ideal solution would perhaps be to produce specific texts for each target culture. It is true that tourist texts often do require considerable «adaptation», situating the activity of tourist translation close to that nebulous border existing in theory between translation and rewriting. From a professional's point of view the debate about the exact situation of that border is probably basically irrelevant, as they simply get on with the job! For each individual commission, the translator will decide, in agreement with the commissioner, who will have received appropriate advice from the translator, the degree of rewriting of the original which is necessary for the communicative situation in which the TT is to be used.

<sup>3</sup> We adopt here the classification of text functions used by Newmark (1988).



### QUALITY OF THE SOURCE TEXT

We shall take just a moment to sidetrack here to a subject which arises constantly both in translator training programmes and professionally: that of the quality of the source text. There seems to be a fairly generalised belief that if the source text is low quality, then the author «deserves» to be translated to the same low quality standards, and that the source text is responsible for the majority of the flaws in the target text. It is true that many tourist texts are not particularly well written (from the point of view of the function they should fulfil: many of them make very mistaken assumptions about their readers and their readers' knowledge). We (as what have been called «targeteers») are of the opinion that the function of the target text should constitute the translator's main guide in decision-making and that she should attempt to produce a target text which fulfils this function to the best of her ability. It is the case that poor originals do not facilitate the translator's work, but they should not be used as an excuse for shoddy results.

### READER EXPECTATIONS: CONTENT

We have already said that we believe that there is often (not always) a need for adaptation of the information load of the source text. This adaptation responds not only to the need to fulfil the informative and persuasive functions of the text (over-dense or obscure data will hardly manage to inform or persuade the reader of anything). It responds also to a need to meet reader expectations regarding the text they are about to read. These expectations come mainly from the reader's previous textual experience, from intertextuality, that is from the reader's knowledge of text conventions firstly in her own language and culture. Jänis & Priiki (1994) discuss the differences which Russian tourists find between Russian and Finnish tourist texts in both content and style. Clearly, differences in conventions regarding type of content, and thus

in reader expectations in this sense, will vary from one language/culture combination to another. In the case of Spanish and English, in our experience there is more emphasis given in Spanish texts to history, architecture, art history, and more emphasis in English-language texts to practical information (opening times, addresses, telephone numbers) than in their respective «equivalents».

Also in relation to content and reader expectations, Sutton (1995) recounts his experience as a translator of Iberia's bilingual in-flight magazine of the considerable fracas, accusations of racism included, brought about in the international Jewish community by what was in Spanish a seemingly inoffensive piece on a village fiesta. Avoiding such reactions to taboo content could also be considered part of the translator's remit as an expert in intercultural mediation.

### READER EXPECTATIONS: STYLE

Just as there are differences in conventions governing content, there are also differences regarding style. Nobs (1996) comments on differences in style for the German/Spanish language/culture combination; these differences interestingly coincide to a great extent with those which we have identified in our own experience for the English/Spanish combination. In particular, there are differences of tenor: the Spanish language text establishes a formal, distant relationship with the reader, who is rarely addressed directly, and then in the formal third person singular *Usted* form. The English language parallel text tends to be less formal, to establish direct communication with the reader, using first and second person forms, imperatives and so on. This difference in distance between author and reader is further accentuated by lexical choice, more formal in Spanish, more colloquial in English. Finally, there is an exceptionally common tendency in Spanish to adopt a «literary» style with florid



descriptive passages and extensive use of figurative language, much less common on the whole in English-language texts.

The question arises for the translator of whether to reproduce the source text conventions or opt for the target text conventions. We have already declared ourselves to be «targeteers», and here again (perhaps even more so than for content), believe that the more successful translations are those in which the conventions of the target culture prevail, as their application constitutes a greater guarantee for the communication process. This is often the difference between translations carried out by professionals and those carried out by non-professionals, whether they write in their language of habitual use or in a foreign language. Jänis & Priiki (1994: 51) speculate that the tourist may be prepared to accept unusual style as part of the experience of getting to know a foreign culture. This may indeed be the case, although we believe that there is a threshold beyond which the text becomes difficult to understand, or even comic for the reader. Part of the translator's job will be to identify this threshold (and not go beyond it!).

#### CONSTRAINTS

Like all translation, translation in the tourist sector encounters constraints which the translator must be ready to recognise and to adapt to. One obvious constraint is that many of these texts are published in several language editions, with Spanish, English, French and German editions of the same booklet appearing at the same time, with the same photographs, the same space for text. On occasion, the text may even appear in a bilingual parallel edition, with one language in the left-hand column, the other in the right (Iberia's in-flight magazine *Ronda Iberia*, for example). These types of edition require the different language texts to be of similar length, and to be relevant to the photographs printed.

As we have already hinted above, further constraints may be placed on the translator's work by the commissioner, particularly if the commissioner has little experience of professional translation, or is the author of the source text, as is quite common in smaller towns, hotels and similar establishments. These are situations which may require diplomacy on the part of the translator, in her role as an expert and advisor in intercultural mediation. The last word, of course, belongs to the commissioner, whose wishes should be respected. Where the translator feels she cannot respect the commissioner's instructions, she should probably not accept the commission at all.

Let us look finally in this section at constraints of a very practical nature. Many tourist texts are written as guides, to be carried as the visitor walks around the town/city in question. They also work in conjunction with other visual information which the tourist will receive, such as signposts on roads and signs outside monuments and public buildings to identify them. These signs are normally only in the language of the country.<sup>4</sup> For this reason the translator will often find that she includes source language terms where she would not normally do so, in order to facilitate identification. Similarly, texts on cuisine will normally maintain the source language terms in order (amongst other things) to permit the visitor to recognise in menus the dishes discussed in the guides. (Menus constitute, in fact, one of the most challenging translation tasks, given on the one hand the enormous cultural differences existing regarding eating habits, taboos and so on, and on the other the tremendous constraints (space) on just how much explanation can be included, not to mention the differences in text conventions from one culture to another.)

<sup>4</sup> See Newmark (1991) for proposals regarding the introduction of multilingual signs and information in tourist destinations.



## SOME EXAMPLES

We shall dedicate the remainder of the paper to illustrating instances of lack of adaptation of content and style leading to the function of the text not being fulfilled as efficiently as possible. We have taken examples at random from texts published about Granada, Vigo and Segovia in Spanish and English. We should like to insist a little on the random nature of our choice of examples to illustrate our point, since this would indicate that the problems arising from the shortcomings of tourist translations are widespread (at least in English-language texts published in Spain), and that there is a need to ensure that in the future there is greater participation of professional translators in this sector of the market which, as we have mentioned above, continues to be in the hands of untrained amateurs. We believe these shortcomings also confirm the need for some form of systematic training in the field on professional training programmes at university.

The texts from which we have extracted the examples often also contained errors arising from the language proficiency of the translator: as we said earlier we shall attempt to ignore these and concentrate on the translational aspects relating to the adaptation or non-adaptation of the texts. The use of italics in the extracts quoted indicates that we have introduced minor changes to correct obvious language deficiencies.

1) *Style*. The following examples are passages from *Vigo sabe a mar*, a promotional leaflet published by the Town Council of Vigo and the Galician regional ministry for Tourism, Industry and Trade in a bilingual Galician/Castilian version and translated into English and French under the English-language title *Vigo tastes of sea*. They reflect the florid figurative style so typical of Spanish tourist texts which clashes with English-language target reader expectations:

«...nuestros pescados y mariscos que son placer de dioses y pecado de cregos y unos vinos blancos que son la perdición de todos los mortales.»

«...our shellfish that are gods' pleasure and priests' sin, and our white wines that mortals can't resist.»

«...estás condenado de por vida a llevar contigo nuestra ciudad. Inicia, pues, tu cadena en estas páginas...»

«...you are *doomed* to take our town with you for life. So, start your *sentence* in these pages...»

«Fruto de la unión de una naturaleza pródiga y de la mano sabia de los vigueses...»

«Fruit of the union between a generous nature and the wise hand of the Vigo inhabitants...»

«...amigo visitante...»

«...dear visitor...»

2) *Information loss due to retention of Spanish term*. This example is taken from *Segovia de día, Segovia de noche*, a bilingual Spanish/English promotional leaflet on the city of Segovia published by SyP Publicidad and distributed free of charge at the city's Tourist Information Office.

«Muy cerca de este Palacio podemos ver la Alhóndiga, municipal que en la actualidad es el Archivo Municipal y sala de Exposiciones.»

«Near this palace we can see the Alhondiga, where we find the Municipal Archives which are an exhibition room.»

Here we have a case of information existing for the ST reader (*Alhóndiga*) not being transmitted for the TT reader, causing at least a brief breakdown in communication. The reader requires the information to be added to the text as it stands: «Alhondiga or corn exchange» or «Alhondiga (corn exchange)», leading possibly

to a slight information overload in this short sentence, particularly if no explicit mention is made of the temporal perspective of the text: «which is *today* home to...»; alternatively, there is the option of translating the term into English and omitting the Spanish, although this option runs the risk of not offering the tourist the possibility of identifying the building as the signs indicating its location will be in Spanish.

The remaining examples are all from *Granada*, a leaflet on the province by the Provincial Tourist Board, published under the same name in Spanish and English. We would venture to suggest here that a more accurate adapted name in English for the publication might be «The Province of Granada», in that for the vast majority of tourists the name Granada refers to the city; most will be unaware of the administrative structure of Spain and of the fact that there is a province of the same name.

3) *Lack of explication of implicit information.*

«Desde el agua y las alamedas de la vega granadina podemos seguir los pasos de García Lorca. Nació, escribió y murió en Granada. Visitar su casa natal en Fuentevaqueros, hoy museo perfectamente conservado y repleto de recuerdos entrañables de sus primeros años. Acercarse a Valderrubio y entrar en la casa donde habitó posteriormente, ventana con ventana con la familia Alba, en la que se inspiró su novela y cuyos descendientes siguen viviendo allí mismo, o ascender hasta las montañas de Viznar y Alfacar, donde una fresca madrugada de agosto presidió su dramática muerte, nos hará reencontrarnos con un Federico escritor universal y hombre marcado por la tragedia de su Patria. Inmortalizado en la capital con el novísimo parque que ostenta su nombre.»

«From the water and the *poplar* groves of *Granada's* vega (plains), we can follow the steps of García Lorca. He was born, wrote and died

in Granada. *You may* visit his home in Fuentevaqueros, which today is a perfectly preserved museum with the warmest memories of his first years. *Approaching* Valderrubio and entering the house where he lived facing the Alba family in which he found inspiration, and whose descendants even today occupy the same house or, climbing the mountains of Viznar and Alfacar where a fresh August dawn witnessed his dramatic death, we find the universal *Federico*. The man marked with the tragedy of his country who was made *immortal* in the capital with a new park that *carries* his name.»

This extract presupposes knowledge which the vast majority of Spanish readers will have: Federico is the same person as García Lorca (implicit in the reference system used by the text); Lorca is one of Spain's greatest poets and playwrights this century; one of his most emblematic plays is entitled *The House of Bernarda Alba*; he was shot by the nationalist side during the Spanish Civil War (implicit in the adjective *dramatic*); Fuentevaqueros, Valderrubio, Viznar and Alfacar are all villages in the province of Granada, close to the city. The English-language version assumes that the reader has the same knowledge and does nothing to help the reader through this maze of references. In fact, it even eliminates a reference which appears in the original «la familia Alba, en la que se inspiró su novela», which (although erroneous!) helps to identify Lorca as a writer, and the Alba family as the characters of one of his works. Perhaps here the translator identified the error, and decided to avoid reproducing it, instead of correcting it! There is a clear need in this case for explication of the implicit content of the ST.

4) *Non-adaptation of system of weights and measures.*

«...una superficie de 12.000 Km<sup>2</sup>.»

«...a surface area of 12,500 Km<sup>2</sup>.»





«...los 102 Km de costa tropical.»

«...its 102 Km of tropical coast...»

Although there are moves towards metrication (with differing degrees of enthusiasm) in some English-speaking countries, the use of miles for distances continues to be the norm at least in the UK, and certainly in the USA. The use of kilometres here can only serve to obscure for the target reader the information the source text offers. It could be argued (although we doubt that it is the reason for the translation given in this case) that the target reader of the English text may not be a native English speaker, given that English is used as a vehicle of communication by speakers of Scandinavian and other languages. This is indeed a further constraint on the translator into English in many cases, but does not justify, in our opinion, the decision to leave the distances in kilometres: surely both systems could be used, giving something along the lines of «65 miles (102 km)», thus facilitating comprehension for all readers.

5) *Information overload not resolved by omission or generalisation. Differing cultural values.*

«Tierras ricas en folklore, fiestas y supersticiones, que nos muestran un pueblo vivo y alegre, indolente y orgulloso. Son notables sus fiestas de Moros y Cristianos. Los cantos y bailes se conservan en toda su pureza. El Trovo, el Taranto, el Fandango de la Alpujarra, el Robao, la Música de Ánimas forman parte de su herencia cultural.»

«*These are* lands rich in folklore, festivities and superstitions *which* show us a lively and joyous, indolent and proud people. *Particularly noteworthy* are its celebrations of Moors and Christians. Songs and dances are preserved in all their purity. The Trovo, the Taranto, the Alpujarran Fandango, the Robao, the Música de las Animas (Music of the departed souls) constitute part of their cultural heritage.»

Here we have an instance of information overload in the list of traditional dances of the mountainous area known as the Alpujarra, further aggravated by the literal translation of one of the names. Surely here, a generic formulation such as «The many and varied local songs and dances are still performed as centuries ago» would transmit the information required by the tourists and avoid the perplexity which at least some of them would feel at having to wade through the list of incomprehensible Spanish terms. For a more specialized reader, perhaps rather than omission, a change in thematization might solve the problem: «Some of the many and varied local dances are the Trovo, the Taranto,...».

A further difficulty arises with the English-language version of this text which reproduces literally the series of adjectives applied to the people of the Alpujarra. It is hard to imagine that a member of an English-speaking culture would accept indolence as a positive quality: indeed such a description would merely serve to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of «Spanish-ness» existing at least in the United Kingdom. A version adapted to the value system of the target culture is required: perhaps «tranquil», or a reference to their lifestyle rather than the people themselves as «unrushed»?

6) *Non-introduction of culturally relevant information not included in source text.*

«Íllora refleja a través de sus empinadas calles sus raíces milenarias. Conserva las ruinas de su antiguo castillo y la Iglesia-atalaya de la Encarnación, de estilo renacentista y valiosos retablos barrocos.»

«Íllora *with* its *steep* streets reveals its *ancient* roots and preserves the ruins of an ancient castle, as well as *the Renaissance parish church of the Encarnación.*»



In this case, we have no comment to make on the information given, but rather on the information not given. In the surroundings of the village of Illora is the estate of the Duke of Wellington, given to the first Duke in recognition of his role in the Peninsular War, and frequently visited by Prince Charles on his private visits to Spain. This information may not be of particular interest to the Spanish-speaking reader, but surely is for the English-language version of the leaflet, intended mainly for British readers, and where it could be included briefly.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper has been to present a brief summary of some of the aspects of translation to be taken into account and some of the main difficulties facing the translator in tourist texts. These difficulties have been illustrated by looking at examples of mis-translated texts taken at random from published English language versions of Spanish originals. The most important conclusion to be drawn from our considerations is probably the need to professionalise the work carried out in this sector, where much work is commissioned to non-professionals. Similarly, we submit that the importance of this sector of the Spanish economy together with the specificity of the translation problems involved would indicate that there is a need for the inclusion of this type of translation on university training programmes, in the case of Spain particularly in units dealing with translation out of Spanish into the students' main foreign language.

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- Segovia de día, Segovia de noche*, SyP Publicidad, Segovia (bilingual Spanish/English version), 1995.
- Vigo sabe a mar*, Concello de Vigo (bilingual Galician/Castilian version), 1995.
- Vigo a un goût de mer/Tastes of Sea*, Concello de Vigo (bilingual French/English version), 1995.

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