Divided Loyalties?
Some Notes on Translating University Websites into English

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Abstract

The translation of university texts into English, especially web-based texts, can be seen as a very particular case of 'localization'. In established models of "web localization", mostly based on translation from English, localization is defined as the adaptation of the linguistic aspects of a product or service to a specific market characterized by a distinct social and cultural profile. However, when addressing an international audience through a lingua franca, as is often the case with institutional websites, there may be no proper target "locale" to speak of and identifying a "target" audience may turn out to be difficult. The paper gives a brief overview of what and how universities translate into English, with special reference to what happens in Italy, and then discusses the implications of translation into lingua-franca English for some fundamental notions employed by scholars and practitioners of translation and cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

Many, if not most, universities around the world are today engaged in internationalization efforts, with internationalization understood as "the integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the tripartite mission of teaching, research and service functions of Higher Education" (Maringe and Foskett 2010: 1).

English has served as the preferred language for the international dissemination of research for decades – not without controversy but with a *de facto* acceptance in this role as a lingua franca by scholars and researchers all around the world and in most, if not all, academic disciplines. As universities in both English-speaking and non-English speaking countries have intensified their efforts to attract students from other countries (or "international students", as they have come to be referred to), English has also been increasingly used as the language used

for instruction in some non-English speaking countries. Quite a few universities have set up degree programmes entirely taught in English, trying to attract "degree-seeking" international students; others have started to advertise individual modules taught in English, mainly aimed at "exchange" students, i.e. those participating in temporary student mobility schemes. The gradual involvement of foreign students has in turn led universities to accommodate English in their service functions, at the very least to introduce newcomers to the workings of a local institution before they become sufficiently competent in the national language.

University service functions supporting research have long been accustomed to an international dimension and to the use of English. Support to teaching is having to catch up fast. In spite of largely successful attempts at harmonising higher education programmes, such as the Bologna process at European level, notable differences have remained in the organization of degree programmes at national and local level. Prospective students need to be given an overview of how degree programmes are structured, how assessment is organized and whether there are opportunities for grants. Even where no English-medium instruction (EMI) programmes are offered, more often than not this basic information is given in English. There are also cases of universities choosing to present themselves in other foreign languages for clearly identified target groups of international students that are hosted on the basis of bilateral agreements between the countries involved. The Marco Polo programme between Italy and China is a case in point.

After consolidating its position as the lingua franca of academic research, English is rapidly establishing itself as the lingua franca for higher education instruction and for a whole host of schemes and services related to it. International student mobility schemes, such as the Erasmus exchange programme, have been successfully set up and, at least in Europe, supranational integration of higher education is sought after by programmes such as the creation of a European Higher Education Area, which was the main objective of what has come to be known as the Bologna Process. A number of satellite initiatives have been launched at EU level to support the Bologna process, giving rise to a copious production of documents (reports, white papers, recommendations) which were mostly originally drafted in English – in many cases by working groups where English native speakers were either a minority or not present at all. A significant body of terminology on higher education in English now exists that can be said to belong to an 'international' or

European variety. This terminology selects certain term variants from the terminology in use in Anglo-Saxon systems or introduces new terms with no equivalents in those systems.

Linguists have argued whether the label of "English as a lingua franca", or ELF, should be made to refer to situations involving only non-native speakers of English or both non-native and native speakers (for a discussion, and an argument in favour of the exclusion of the native speaker constituency, see Mauranen 2012). Those tending to exclude native speakers are also inclined not to consider translation into English as a case of lingua-franca use. Others take a more comprehensive approach and explicitly see translation into English as a lingua-franca scenario, especially where English is chosen to address an international audience or where translation into English is performed by non-native speakers of the language (see, for instance, the various contributions collected in Taviano 2013).

Whether one view or the other is considered more acceptable, it is indisputable that the role of English as a lingua franca puts it into a special position when translation either into or from English is discussed. In particular, translation into English for an international audience, and the attendant blurring of a clearly identifiable target context, make for a reassessment of some fundamental notions (such as "purpose", "loyalty" and even "equivalence") that in Translation Studies have in recent years been discussed almost exclusively in terms of the target pole of translation. As Mossop (1990) was already stressing immediately before the heyday of descriptive approaches (with their tendency to see translations as "facts of a 'target' culture"; Toury 1995/2012), there are translation situations and approaches in which the source context can play as important a role as the target.

The decision to choose a lingua franca as the target language in translation seems to have local implications as much as international effects. Institutional translation in particular, to be intended as translation performed by individual, "concrete" institutions in Mossop's (1988; 1993) and Koskinen's (2008; 2011) terms, may be subject to constraints that have to do with either source factors or sub-cultures cutting across the source-target distinction. Universities as institutions are particularly exemplary in this respect, trying as they are to intensify their international outreach while at the same time operating in a context still heavily influenced by local factors, such as demographic trends and national legislation.

In the present paper, the view is taken that the use of English for communicating with an international audience is a lingua-franca scenario, regardless of the specific text generation process, i.e. translation, drafting or a mixture of the two – this last being a particularly common case in the university setting. Indeed, "translation" is here deliberately taken as a default, or overarching, label for the various modes of production of texts in ELF, based on the theoretically questionable but descriptively practical assumption that all texts produced in English in a non-native speaker environment will have resulted from a fundamentally translational or mediated process.

In the following, the paper will first give a brief overview of what and how universities translate into English, with special reference to what happens in Italy - where the author has some first-hand experience of translating or revising English-language materials produced for promotional or administrative purposes. A discussion will then follow elaborating the implications of translation by universities and lingua-franca English as a target language for some fundamental notions employed by scholars and practitioners of translation and cross-cultural communication.

2. Putting university materials in English

As English has come to play "a major role" (Jenkins 2013: 5) in the internationalization of global higher education in all facets of the tripartite mission mentioned above, universities all over the world today increasingly produce English-language versions of a wide range of materials having to do with all of their three primary functions (teaching, research and services), whether or not they include English-medium instruction in their programmes. Besides journal articles and all other research-related documents, these materials include promotional web pages and brochures, press releases, study guides, rules and regulations, and a wide variety of administrative forms and documents.

The process leading to the creation of such materials is rarely clear-cut and varies considerably not only from one university to another but also within the same university. The English language version of a document may be arrived at through translation or drafting in English, with English language drafting likely to have established itself as the norm in countries where internationalization has a longer tradition (see, for instance,

Björkman 2013 for an extensive description of the functioning of a university in Sweden where English is the academic lingua franca). In the case of translation, the source text may be a document that also exists autonomously in the source language or as a draft prepared expressly for translation purposes. The translation of web material may be handled through content management systems, with similarities to what happens in website localization, especially where the text to be handled is stored in databases that are meant for automatic updates of the university website (e.g. for course catalogues).

It is not common for a university to have a dedicated translation service. For communication in English a number of universities make use of staff employed in their own language centres. Some language centres in Europe have established a dedicated translation unit, which, in rare cases, may even become organized as separate businesses employing in-house translators or outsourcing jobs to freelancers.[1] Other language centres (perhaps the majority) provide translation services on a more loosely organized basis, with various forms of collaboration with the marketing and web communication teams of the university.

Italian universities are no exception to this overall picture and in the last few years have been engaged in the translation or English-language drafting of a vast and diverse amount of materials. Initially, these materials tended to be of a predominantly promotional nature and often took the form of either printed leaflets or a dedicated "international" section hosted within a university's website. Over the years, as some universities have tried to acquire a more pronounced international dimension (with a few launching English-taught degree programmes) English has consolidated its role as the lingua franca for communicating with prospective and enrolled students. Moreover, whereas at undergraduate level foreign students may be expected to learn Italian over the course of their studies, at postgraduate level it may often be the case the international students go on using English throughout the duration of their research project carried out in Italy.

As a result, the information and services provided in English by Italian universities have increased in both range and volume. Quite a few university websites today act as portals for a wide range of on-line

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[1] Examples include the Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, in Spain, and Radboud University Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. In both universities the language centre hosts a dedicated unit offering translation and editing services to either other units of the university or external clients.

transactions, including enrolment, course delivery and support, and library lending and research. In particular, some universities are engaged in configuring their online platforms so as to accommodate an English-language version of whatever information such platforms are designed to host, from course catalogues to the detailed description of organizational units and facilities.

A multilingual, or at least bilingual (Italian-English) dimension has, in short, come to be required for a significant subset of the administrative functions of a university and a considerable amount of translation into or drafting in English is carried out both for the general public and in 'back-office' operations, e.g. for the issuing of certificates to international students or the establishment of agreements with universities abroad. There have been nation-wide (and mostly EU-backed) initiatives at developing resources either for the support of universities' internationalization efforts or to assist individual citizens interested to know more about higher education in Italy. As far as language is concerned, however, no unified or authoritative resource has been created to provide support for translation or foreign-language drafting.

Some individual universities (e.g. Bologna) have developed and posted online their own Italian-English glossaries or term bases but efforts in this respect have never gone beyond the level of local institutions. This has frequently meant that many terminological wheels have been reinvented, given that the profile of degree programmes at all the three "cycles" of higher education is pretty much the same all over the country. For once, the strong centralizing tendency typical of Italian administration might have proven beneficial and although there have been attempts at coordinating a national effort to present the system of Italian higher education to an international audience, these now seem to have been discontinued.[2]

This does not mean that projects aiming at attracting international students have been completely abandoned. The Marco Polo project for Chinese students, for instance, is still up and running, but information about it is currently mainly available in Italian only, and only on ministerial web pages. The impression, in other words, is that online environments

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[2] A portal called *Study in Italy* is available online at http://www.study-in-italy.it/ but appears to be out of date at the time of writing, as the most recent information refers to the academic year 2011-2012. The portal has versions in various languages (English, German, Spanish and French), with the English version richer in information than the others and including a section specifically addressed to prospective students from China.

are being used not so much to reach the final potential users (i.e. prospective students) but rather for keeping intermediaries (i.e. university staff in Italy and staff at Italian embassies abroad) up to date. This tendency to use online environments for 'insiders' is also to be found in quite a number of university websites *in Italian*, which seem to have been conceived mainly for people (staff and students) already in the know about programmes and procedures. In this respect, they are a good example of how online communication adapts to a "High Context Culture" (Katan 2004), with the online environment providing props (e.g. forms or PDF documents) for procedures that are best illustrated verbally and face-to-face.

3. Translating university websites: stylistic and terminological issues

The design of a multilingual university website is subject to a variety of considerations and constraints having to do with the fundamental intended purpose(s) of the website and the requirements of the university 'stakeholders', i.e. students and parents, lecturers and researchers, administrators, funding institutions and government bodies. The specific questions to consider when designing multilingual material for a university website include: the basic design of the website, i.e. whether content and services should be provided equally in all designated languages or whether different content should be given in different languages (through ad hoc creation, translation, or a mixture of the two); the number of languages; the level of detail of the content presented in foreign language versions; the awareness of cross-cultural issues if the foreign language material is presented to an international audience; the availability of resources (in terms of manpower and translation tools); technical issues such as the interaction with existing content management systems and the maintenance of multilingual materials (e.g. in the form of translation memories); and measures for assessing the effectiveness of the material provided in other languages.

Like other websites, university websites can include sections with different communicative functions. Some sections will have a predominantly promotional or advertising function; others will be more informational; others still (possibly configured as restricted-access portals or platforms) will have a more overtly transactional nature. One probably distinctive feature of university websites is that these sections may be

addressed to very different audiences: promotional materials are primarily for the general public and prospective students; informative materials and transactional sections are addressed to enrolled students and teaching, research or administrative staff.

As already mentioned, the translation of university materials published on the web may in some respects resemble the process of localization of other institutional websites or corporate and commercial websites. More specifically, the aspects that the translation of institutional web materials by universities shares with more mainstream forms of web localization can be summarised as follows: essentially digital nature of content; handling of text in 'chunks' or de-contextualized strings, especially in website sections handled through databases and content management systems; possibility to use specific tools for the translation of "legacy" materials (i.e. past translations to be reused).

On the other hand, web translation for universities differs from localization in a number of other significant respects. First of all, the creation of foreign language materials is unlikely to follow the series of systematic steps entailed, at least in principle, by a localization project. Likewise, the people involved in translation activities at university may act according to much more loosely defined roles than those involved in localization projects. One practical consequence of this is that the possibility of using specific software tools for translation, such as translation memories and terminology management systems, remains more often than not unexploited by universities. Another difference with web localization lies in the nature and scope of the content to be translated.

In particular, it is still often the case for university websites to be considered as mere repositories for texts originally conceived for other mediums, in the misguided belief that their posting on online platforms requires no adaptation. The decision to provide an English-language version of such texts may be taken on an ad-hoc basis and depending on the availability of staff with relevant multilingual skills. In other words, some translated materials may appear as a result of unsystematic processes, which – contrary to sound localization policy – prevents the adoption of terminologically and stylistically uniform renderings in the target language.

On a much more general level, web translation into English by universities differs from localization for one fundamental aspect. In established models of web localization, mostly based on translation *from*

English, localization is defined as the adaptation of the linguistic aspects of a product or service to a specific market characterized by a distinct social and cultural profile (Pym 2010; Jiménez Crespo 2013). This profile is seen as acting as a 'guiding light' in making translation decisions. However, when addressing an international audience through a lingua franca, there is no proper target "locale" to speak of and identifying a target culture may turn out to be difficult – a difficulty already noted by Limon (2008) in relation to the translation into English of Slovenian company websites. Indeed, in the particular case of university websites the "locale" guiding English-language drafting or translation choices may even turn out to be that of the *source* culture, especially as far as terminology is concerned.

A clear source-target distinction, however, seems to be increasingly challenged by the generalized effort towards the internationalization of higher education. An intermediate, or supranational, level of communication is emerging, in line with harmonization schemes such as those promoted by the Bologna process. For example, universities that apply the principles of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and wish to be officially recognized as doing so through an "ECTS label" are required to publish both an Information Package and a Course Catalogue in English on their website, with the Information Package expected to offer detailed descriptions of study programmes, units of learning, university regulations and student services. Similar descriptions have come to be adopted as templates for communication in English by universities not deliberately seeking an ECTS certification.

In short, for university web texts having a fundamentally informative-promotional nature, an international template seems to be emerging (Palumbo forthcoming) in which content features typical of internationalization efforts are combined, on a stylistic level, with rhetorical moves that draw on the explicitly persuasive character of institutional communication by Anglo-Saxon universities – what, in the pre-web era, Fairclough (1993) identified as the "marketization" of public discourse by universities, based on the direct address of readers ("you"/students versus "we"/the university), the strategic nominalization of key concepts and notions (e.g. "teaching excellence", "expertise", "a dynamic environment"), the introduction of narratives and the particular use of modality and tense. This content-stylistic template has emerged in a sort of intercultural space related to higher education as a supranational "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991).

However, this shared community of practice should never be assumed. For example, universities that choose to illustrate reasons that make them excellent or particularly worth considering for prospective international students (a common move in online promotional materials) should be warned to check that these reasons travel well across cultures. An Italian university originally included, in its online list of the top reasons why international students should choose it, the fact that its bachelor's degree students took, on average, 3.5 years to complete three-year degrees – an actual achievement for Italian universities, where significant percentages of students take the opportunity to go fuori corso (i.e. beyond the allotted time for completing their degree), which is probably not a good advertising move in the eyes of keen international students or parents looking to finance their children's university education abroad. The item in question was simply deleted from the English translation of the list.

The increase of communication in English by universities has given rise to the need to establish terminological equivalents for a wide variety of concepts, including degree programme denominations, titles and administrative procedures. The terms used in the diverse set of documents and materials that describe or regulate the functioning of universities and higher education institutions in general may be labelled 'educational terminology', so as to be distinguished from the disciplinary terminology used in research publications. As already noted above, a rich terminological repertoire has emerged, in international English, as a by-product of the many supranational initiatives aimed at putting the principles of the Bologna process into practice. Such terms come 'pre-packaged', as it were, with an English-language label and their use in English-language translated websites only pose problems when they diverge from current usage national varieties of English that a translation may be implicitly adhering to. At EU level, for instance, the term *course* (used to designate one of the units making up a degree programme) is often used for what British universities tend to call *module*.

The educational terminology likely to pose more problems in translation is that having to do with concepts that have no equivalent or only partial equivalents in either idiomatic English or international English. Faced with one such term, the translator may decide that her best bet is a label that, although appearing to be un-idiomatic in English, at the same time guarantees a certain degree of formal similarity to the source, and hence transparency: e.g. *rector* (as opposed to *vice-chancellor*) for the Italian *rettore*. The translator's reasoning here may be that the risk of using

an inappropriate term in English is less significant than that of disorienting the target reader by using an English term that is conceptually analogous but formally more distant from the source term. The literalist translation strategy becomes an expedient in light of the particular pair of languages involved, or rather in consideration of the presence of English acting as both target and lingua franca.

In short, an Italian term may end up being translated literally even in presence of more idiomatic alternatives in English so as to ensure recognisability vis-à-vis either the original or, as is also frequently the case, past translations that have gained some form of official status. What the Italian ministry for education calls *settore scientifico- disciplinare* would perhaps best be rendered as just *subject* or *discipline* in an academic context; the term *scientific-disciplinary sector* has however already appeared in official documents and regulations at national level. Consequently, a local university may decide, not without reason, to stick to it, so as not to disorient users alternating between documents in Italian and English and expecting the term to have more of an administrative rather than disciplinary relevance.

The literalist strategy would seem to contradict the emphasis on the target pole placed by functionalist models of translation such as Nord's (1997), where a distinction is customarily made between "instrumental" and "documentary" translation, the former focusing on the communicative purpose of a text within the target culture and the latter aiming at preserving formal correspondence with the source text. When terminology is involved and English is both target *and* lingua franca, however, the distinction between an instrumental and a documentary approach may become blurred: (documentary) literalist choices may have exactly the (instrumental) function of orienting target-language readers in the source environment.

4. Conclusion

As noted by Mossop (1990: 353), an institution's success in achieving its translation goals "may depend in part on whether it takes into account different types of reader". As illustrated above, universities as institutions communicate to different types of audiences and their websites, in particular, collect materials that cater for a wide range of informative and transactional needs. In another, related paper, Mossop (1988: 65), argues

that the goals of a translating institution determine the general approach taken in the translation it produces: "whether they are literal or free" or "whether the language is conventional or innovative". In the case of universities, a combination of approaches can be seen to coexist, resulting from the diversity of functions of the materials they produce and the fact that their circulation via the same online platforms is able to reach audiences on very different "scales" (Blommaert 2007): prospective students in distant parts of the world, prospective students from neighbouring countries, enrolled local students and staff.

The "loyalty" (Nord 1997) of the (largely ideal) translator of university texts may appear to be divided between the target audience abroad and the local target audience (e.g. that of already enrolled international students). However, a closer look reveals that the translator's loyalty should ultimately remain with readers if communication is to be deemed successful. This means that different approaches can co-exist and be adopted, on a case by case basis, depending on the distance between the 'translating university' and the audience. A more instrumental or functional approach is likely to work for a loosely defined international audience or when the university is presenting itself through texts of an essentially promotional nature. In such cases, texts may often have to be put through a "cultural filter" (House 1997; Katan 2004) so as to adapt them to the expectations of the international audience. "Transcreation" recently seems to be a popular term for describing an approach that heavily re-creates a text, especially a multimodal one, in order to adapt it to the cultural expectations of the target audience (cf. Sissel 2013).

Documentary, or even literalist, approaches, on the other hand, may work better if translation is fundamentally acting as an introduction to the everyday functioning of a university, especially one that does not offer English-medium instruction. In such cases, translations may be seen to serve as temporary placeholders for labels that readers are expected to gradually familiarize with in the local language. The English used for such labels is likely to be perceived as particularly 'hybridized' or distant from standard varieties – a feature found in all translations but perhaps likely to become particularly apparent in translations into a lingua franca.

Both these scenarios are compatible with a view of translation as having the genuine aim to communicate, and together they could be contrasted with situations in which the use of English (or any other lingua franca) is only a requirement imposed from above and perceived by an institution as un unnecessary burden.

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