"The Distraction of Culture"

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ABSTRACT

Although translation and interpreting (T&I) have been performed for as long as languages have existed, the exponential growth in demand for these activities in the last fifty years has only recently brought supply of these services to a degree of organisation similar to that of a modern profession, and only in a small number of societies.

Critical to the achievement of this status is a clear, rational and consistent articulation of the definitive skill set and role of a professional T&I practitioner.

In this paper I first examine the word "culture" (and a number of the concepts to which it refers) and its evolution in recent times, mapping its current usage, and its rhetorical and political effects, which are powerful and attractive.

I then describe the current tendency of people, inside and outside the T&I industry, to rely on the established power of the word "culture" as a major element of the public perception of T&I that they seek to establish, and I argue that this is counterproductive, and delays the day that T&I are effectively explained to, and understood by, the general public.

My position

I am a practitioner, and I speak as a member of a group of working people whose degree of organisation is approaching that which would be colloquially described as a "profession". Some say it already is, the beginning of it having been dated variously at the end of the first world war, the end of the second world war, or ten years hence, if we're lucky.

There are theories of professions[i] which describe them empirically as though natural phenomena. These theories correctly list the attributes that are displayed by all those organised activities that we choose to call Professions. But they mix together those attributes which are the planned outcomes of consciously directed activity, and those attributes incidental to such organisation, with no regard as to whether the latter are desirable or valid or planned from anyone's point of view.

I am in the position of deliberately and consciously working towards the establishment of a profession. It is a specific outcome. This work is consciously directed towards that and consists of many elements. Today I will focus on one:

> The constant and consistent articulation of the core skill set and role of a professional translator, to encourage the establishment of a public construction of this profession that serves the interests of the people within the profession, and because a profession has certain obligations to the public it serves, that also serves the interests of its clients.
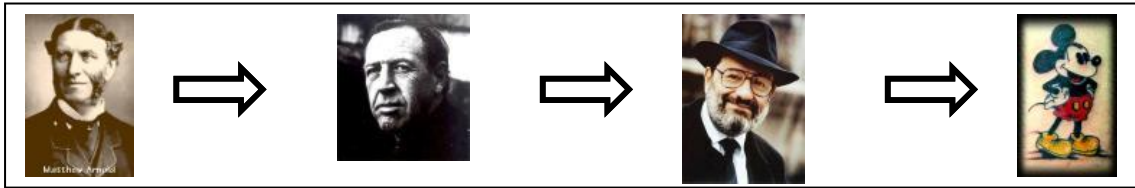
What is culture?

Fig. 1 Definers of Culture

The concept of culture has enjoyed an exciting ride over the past 100 years, expropriated by Matthew Arnold from where it had been simply a word implying growth of the agri and horti kind, lived for a while as a imperialist territorial marker, and was then cut down to size by Raymond Williams. Since then everyone's had a go. They've had a bag of fun, and these days we may avail ourselves of many different concepts and definitions of culture. So to make sense of what I have to say today I must state what definition of culture I employ in the arguments that follow. It's my own. I wrote it. That's encouraged, in *my* culture anyway.

Culture exists only insofar as descriptive propositions are made that:

A) describe human behaviour that is formed by social and physical environment, and

B) do not apply to all humans.

For example the proposition "people prepare food" is common to all people, but the statement "people prepare food by burying it in clay pots for three months" is only true of some and so is what I call a cultural proposition.
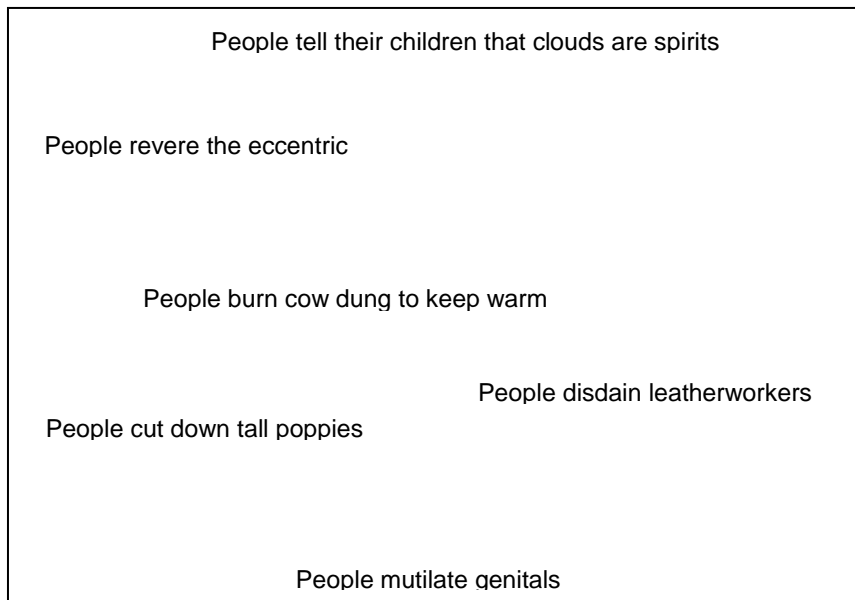

Fig. 2 Cultural propositions

The more homogenous and isolated a culture, the easier it will be to form descriptive propositions that apply uniquely to all the people within that culture. But in my model culture doesn't exist until it is described by others. There is, strictly speaking, no such

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thing as "culture" as long as people remain absolutely isolated, and unaware that other people exist who could be differentiated from them by describing the way they live.[ii]

Culture only exists as a museumified construct of people external to it. Every proposition that is successfully formed, implies the existence of other cultures of which the same general principle exist but which is different to the extent that is described in the proposition. Even members of a culture, if describing their own culture, must step outside it conceptually to do so.

This also satisfies the pomo requisite that every opinion simultaneously describes, and reinforces the power structure that serves the describer.

The truth or verifiability of individual cultural propositions will be practically testable and liable to meaningful debate. But of course the idea that discrete cultures "exist" as "things" is barely tenable.

The exact membership of groups of people which a set of propositions accurately describe, will differ from depending on the make up of that set, from proposition to proposition, and from day to day, even in highly homogenous cultures. So it is always different for every person describing and being described. If "culture" exists anywhere it is only in that group of propositions.
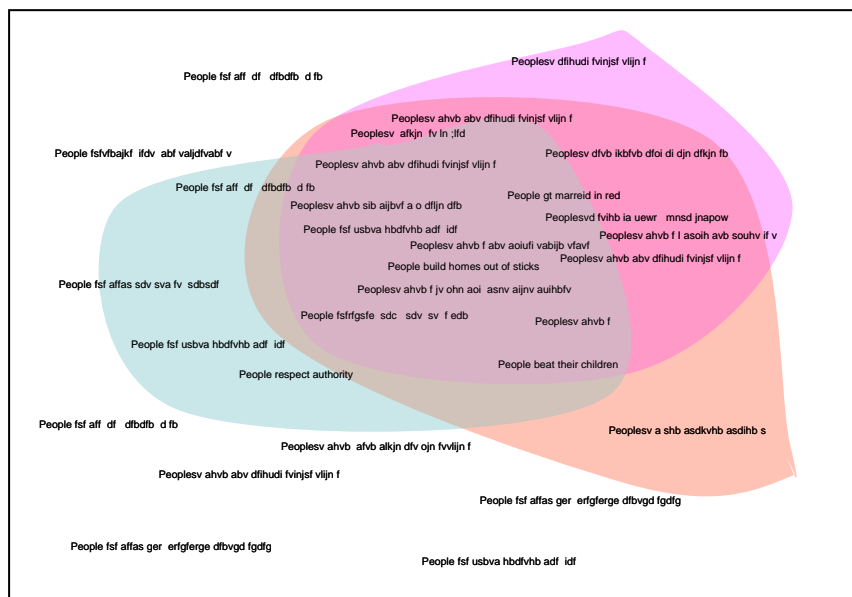

Fig. 3 Sets of cultural propositions as "cultures"

"Cultures" as things, overlap with one another, and blend and dissolve over time. At any point in time and space a "culture" can be said to exist, but it can never be precisely measured. A cloud is visible and it's existence is beyond sane dispute and it has an exact shape, but we will never be able to make a plaster cast of it.

There are those who claim to have done so though.

The identification of a group of propositions so large and uniform as to warrant the naming of a whole culture, and discussions that rely on the word "culture" as a countable noun, is a political industry rather than a scholarly pursuit.

But it is on the back of this industry that the word "culture" has acquired the most powerful discursive cachet in recent times.

As a rationale for everything from antisocial behaviour to government grants it acts as a potent thought preventer and is a piece of moral high ground in popular debate to which the government has built a chair lift for everyone's convenience. It is an impressively self-supporting justification for many things that were previously laid open to scrutiny and criticism on a variety of other grounds that were much more practical.

Translators confront many problems and perform many tasks which they have taken to describing as "cultural problems".

I am arguing today that a perfectly good reasoning to support all the decisions made in the line of a professional translator's work, expressed in nothing but the terminology of linguistics, rests just beneath the surface and is available to anyone with the training and inclination to excavate. But translators have been distracted by this attractive word "culture".

Can you blame them? When those around us are far more likely to do as asked if we couch our request in the occult imperatives of culture, to which we as ethnics, or translators, have exclusive access, than to argue our case on the basis of fully developed and tedious technicalities of language?

What is language?

 I had also better define what I mean by language, and its bastard love child, translation.

In my work I rely on a model of language, on which I base several theoretical statements. To explain it usually takes about four hours. I will now attempt to do it in four minutes.

The question "what is language" has two possible interpretations:

- What shall we draw a line around and call "language"?

- What's inside the line?

I hope I've answered both of those questions. I begin with the central driving force of language:

- The spontaneous construction of strings of words by individuals that have the *potential* of vocalisation and which conform to the rules of grammar and pronunciation to the extent that the social aims of the speaker are likely to be achieved.

It all starts just *beneath* vocalisation.

Language is all the things that feed into and are produced from this central point.

Below is a picture of all the things we've drawn the line around, it's a triangle, and here's what we've called them. It can be divided up into three parts: a cognitive process which is the inner voice, a social behaviour which is speech – the inner voice poking out into social space, both of which are necessary prerequisites for the cultural artefact of writing. I urge you to note the relative importance that I have attempted to show here graphically with size.
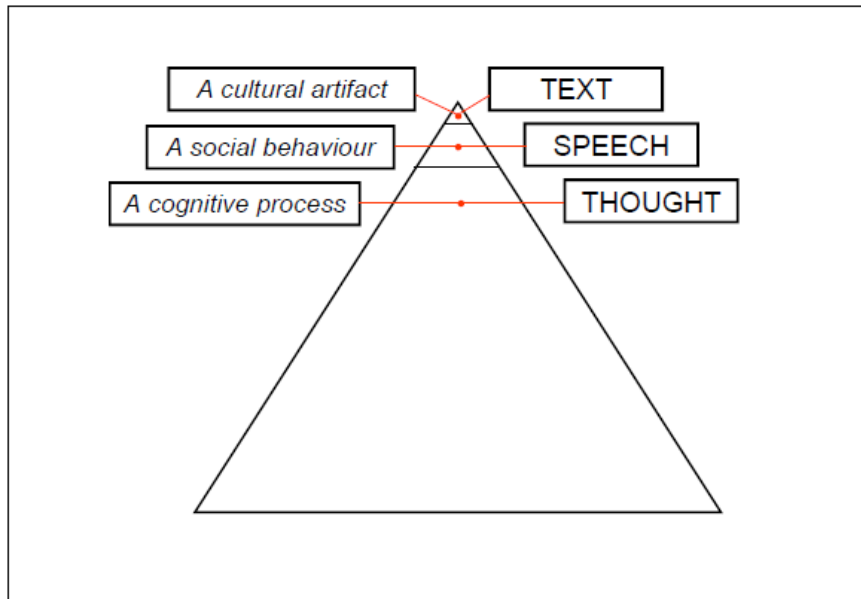
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Fig. 4 What is language?

I would return to that central point and say further that this cognitive process and social behaviour are:

- primarily means by which we mediate and modify both social relationships, and our relationship with our self.

And please note the proportions and how they overlap with the sections in Fig. 4:
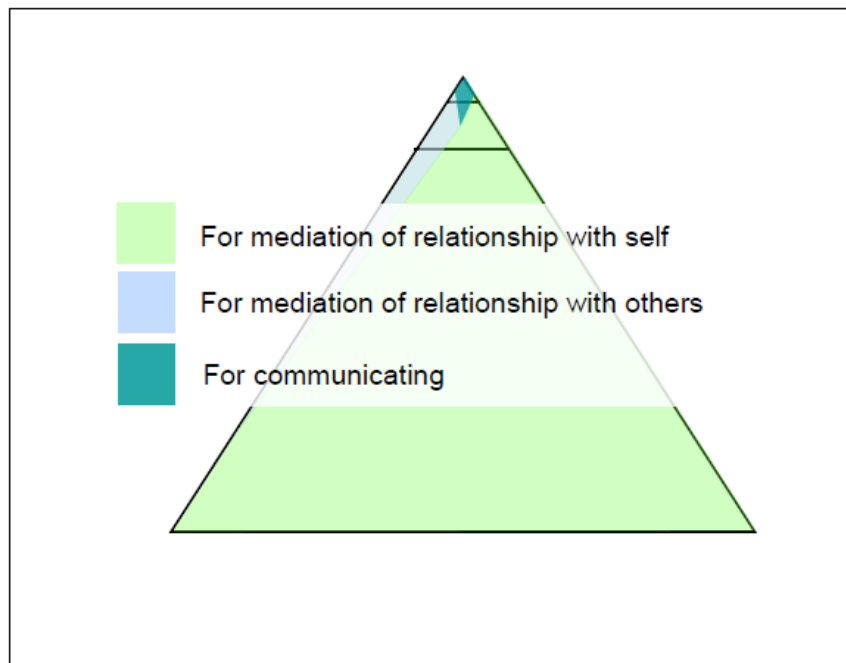

Fig. 5 What is language for?

This model of language has been very useful to me so far, but I have only been able to develop it because I am unencumbered by the need to be taken seriously. It may be at odds certainly with the popular and even academic conception of language.

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I believe that the evolution of our understanding of these things has been governed and distorted by the development of technology, in particular writing systems approximately 4,000 years ago. By definition, writing has privileged the written over the spoken for all of recorded history. The relatively minor threat to this position made by the invention of audio recording 130 years ago has yet to significantly change these circumstances as the waves are still finding their way through the back-biting labyrinth that is the modern academy.

But the upshot is that modern conceptions of language are still largely uninformed by the fruits of the past 100 years of linguistics research, and still suffer beneath a massive yoke of historical inertia, and we all pull against a great saddlebag of inaccurate and debilitating assumptions. These assumptions are Eurocentric, text-based, prescriptive and comparative. Most people assume that language is about communication, that it is a moral activity that can be "good" or "bad" and that its centre of gravity is the rarefied locus of literature.

I reject all of these assumptions. I consider all these things: the invention of writing, literature, poetry, and even the communication of objective data from one head to another, nothing but freakish side-effects of language. They are as transient and irrelevant as the rainwater running off the sides of the great volcano of language, which, properly defined, is a cognitive process and social behaviour for which the individual is rewarded to the extent that their psychological, social and territorial aims are achieved.

That's my definition of language. And my definition of translation is to ask myself of every group of people who require the services of a translator "what would they be doing now if they shared a language?" Successful translation is the restoration of that experience to them.

Every other conceivable yardstick by which the work of a translator may be judged must address that question in the end.

Language and Culture are different.

So I have defined culture. It is the sum of propositions descriptive of behaviour that is determined by social and physical environments, applicable to any group of humans smaller than the total of all humans.

And I have defined language: A cognitive process and social behaviour that 99% of the time is simply a tool by which we control our relationship with others and with ourselves.

These are clearly two different things. The statement "people speak a language" is not a cultural proposition, because it is true of all people.

Now any two things can be described as different or similar depending on the use to which that information is to be put. To reiterate, I am speaking from the position of working towards the development of a profession, the public construction of which is based on a coherent and consistent statement of our core skills. And for that purpose language and culture completely different things.

Some people object to this. Quite a few translators do. Many of them argue that the former is determined by the latter.

But to say that all languages are influenced by culture is no more useful than to say all dancing is influenced by gravity.

It is perfectly correct to observe that the manner in which we divide up the observable world into named parts; the way in which we order time and hierarchy; the rules by which different members of a group take their turn to speak and so on, are all behaviours determined by certain social and physical environments, and can all therefore be described with cultural propositions.

But that's why it is irrelevant to the translator. *All* of them can, without exception. Every utterance and text has it in common. It is the task of the translator to understand in the finest contingent detail what makes a particular text or utterance functionally different from another, within that language, and to act on that understanding competently and ethically whilst suffering the relentless influence of culture.

Translators are operating at a level of engagement and detail where cultural determination is a given, and is too crude a qualification for the specific tasks they are called on to perform.

It is specifically the differences between language and culture, and the joints and ligatures by which language is connected to any of those individual propositions, that a translator is being paid to understand, articulate, negotiate and if necessary as is often the case, sever, so that the things that are being attempted in one language can succeed in another.

This mention of "achievement" is consistent with my definition, because language is primarily a tool that people use to attempt and achieve things. Interpreters or translators only get involved when a language barrier is frustrating those attempts.

Many translators have been distracted by the argument that translation tasks include a significant proportion of problems that require knowledge of a specific culture to solve. There are strong movements to found the legitimacy of interpreter or translator as a profession on the native familiarity with certain cultures and the further assumption that this familiarity qualifies them to negotiate the "border crossings" that take place when cultures contact one another. The terms "cultural broker" or "cultural mediator" are starting to take root and spread. I find these arguments flawed and dangerous.

But a person can retain all of their culture, even after learning to speak the language dominant in another culture to which they have emigrated. In other words not all, not even a significant proportion of the cultural propositions that applied to a new Australian prior to their becoming fluent in English, are extinguished by that fluency once acquired.

In a piece entitled "Wedding Sandals" recently published in Quadrant, Sonia Mycak recounts in the beautiful English of an educated Aussie, the minutiae of emotional significance for her to be married in a traditional Ukrainian ceremony, almost down to the recipes.

Similarly individuals may encounter difficulties in reconciling their own culturally determined expectations or practices with those of the country that they live in, but if they speak English fluently nobody thinks to call an interpreter to solve the problem!

So in my reading to prepare this talk, I've started to wonder if in fact we are not talking at cross purposes. I think there is a confusion of nomenclature and best explained with this vertical hierarchy of "units of translation", as a simple theoretical framework.

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                    Chapter
                     Page
                   Paragraph
                    (idea)
                   Sentence
                    Clause
                    Phrase
                     Word
                   Phoneme
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Fig. 6 Units of translation

This will surely be known to you, starting with phoneme at the bottom and working upwards through word, phrase, clause, sentence, idea, paragraph, page, chapter etc.

The cross purposes are that there is confusion over what to call work at different levels on this hierarchy. I found people describing themselves as cultural brokers and cultural mediators, and when I examined what it was they were doing that they thought made them these things, in my books they were just doing good translation.

So what do *they* call translation? Something that I wouldn't?

The history of our understanding of language and translation has basically been a struggle upwards on this hierarchy. It began with, and is rooted in, the primitive sacredness that was attached to the very words on the page.

This is an understandable vestige of a world where the only people who could read or write also happened to be rich and control the keys to heaven. You *would* end up thinking those scribbles had some sort of magic in them, or that burning books would change things. But though we have largely left those days behind, we still struggle under the disproportionate influence of literature, which I blame.

Literature is the cultural artefact. It is a tiny fraction, of that last little fragment of language. It is like an employer in John Howard's new Industrial relations regime. It presents the translator with a set of terms and conditions and the translator must take them or leave them.

Except for edification of the reader and sustenance of the author, literature has few short term and verifiable objectives external to its own proclamation. The very text, at a very low level of unit of translation, is a cultural activity in itself. Literature is about itself and a literary translator seeks to restore the experience of reading *that text*, to a foreign reader.

This is unlike all other manifestations of language, which are much more utilitarian. They have aims and objectives, criteria of success or failure, quite external to their actual content. They are people doing things for which language is necessary, and the likely success or failure in pursuing those aims will dictate modification, and the ultimate form and content of the language.

Literature will brook no such dog wagging from the impertinent tail of reality. Literature is a sovereign whose only function is to "be".

For starters I think this is more evidence that as a profession we are barely out of our nappies because we have yet to define and agree on the concepts most fundamental to our occupation. I would say that any process that did less than restore to my clients as far as practically possible the experience of sharing a language, doesn't actually qualify as translation. I would rather that as a basic rule, as part of the construction of our profession, that we reserve that word to describe exclusively a product that we are prepared to accept payment against.

If you threw some flour, yeast and water in a bowl and sat it next to a box of matches, would anyone call that "bread"?

Yesterday Yavar described a text full of "Persian proverbs" that "don't make sense in English". If they made sense in Persian, and they don't make sense now, then they aren't in English! They haven't been translated yet! Who would accept payment for something that completely failed to do what it did in the original?

What culture of training and education, what system of ethics, would allow graduates to think that the lower order units of translation are to be preferred at the expense of the very reason that a client has called for our help?!

The upwards struggle is meeting varying degrees of success, and where new ground is won, I think that the reasons that we see the introduction of terms like cultural broker and cultural mediator are three fold:

- people are reluctant to call it translation because it offends the historical preference for units of translation of a lower order, which also infects current training and education with a bias in that downwards direction

- they are attracted to the political power of aligning themselves with the word "Culture"

- They lack a mental library of terms and concepts specifically for the description of language and linguistic problems

The new ground is the stacking on the top of that hierarchy of units of translation, units like "function", "objectives" and "outcomes".
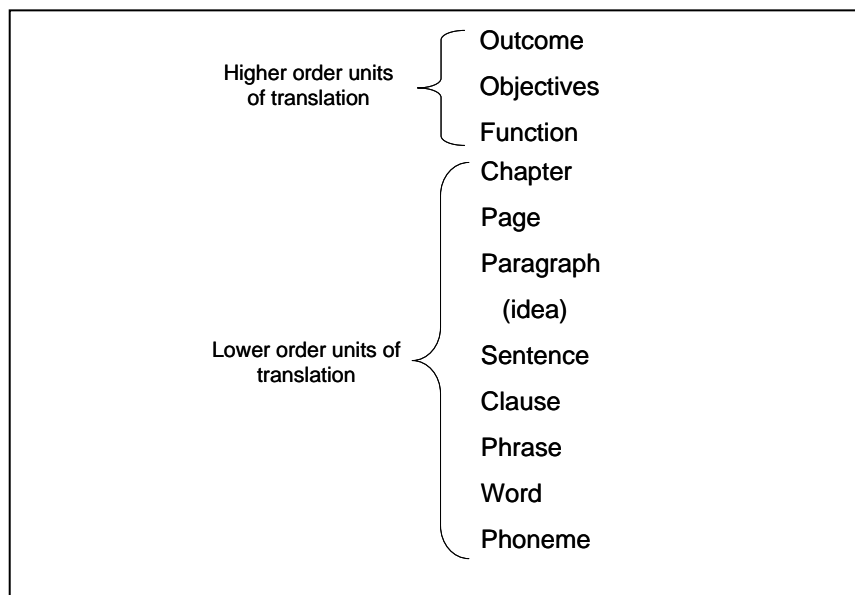

Fig. 7 Higher order units of translation

These are not visible text elements. But is faithfulness only owed to the visible?

I think this suggests another pressure acting on translators in the downward direction on that hierarchy of units of translation. Security. We often have the need to defend our decisions, and they will be more easily defended, in that a wider range of people with a necessarily lower level of understanding will be likely to accept our defence, if we stick to the visible, and steer clear of the abstract and contestable units of translation.

But is that good enough? If theorists want to learn something from practitioners I would start by saying that if I'm not getting paid, I'm not practicing anymore. If I can't empower someone sitting one side of a language barrier and attempting the change the world on the other side, how on Earth can I take their money?

And yet deverbalising seems to be such a challenging concept, that some are unwilling to label the product thereof "translation"!

So let's look at a couple of problems that a translator might confront, and call "cultural problems" and let's examine them to see whether that is in fact the case.

Some examples have been provided by practitioners who note that insulting an Italian by calling them a "rat" or a Thai person by calling them a "pig" can have unintended consequences because the two animals are revered for some positive qualities in those target languages as opposed to their slyness or propensity to wallow in filth that we attach in ours. But is this a cultural problem that a translator must solve? Only if you are mindless slave to the word as the unit of translation.

I wonder on what grounds can a practitioners expect remuneration for the translation of an insult when the recipient feels complimented? Clearly function or outcome should be the unit of translation and the particular choice of TL word will be tailored to create the correct effect on the recipient (as both my respondents reported they would do).

I acknowledge that very short performatives, rituals, phatic utterances like greetings, jokes, expletives and so on are difficult because they present fewer options to work-around using the immediate context. But nothing's impossible. Just expensive.

To translate "Cow's milk" into Vietnamese or Spanish in Peru will lead the reader to automatically assume "condensed milk", because for reason of their past social and physical environments that's the only milk they've been exposed to[iii].

Those pitfalls are culturally determined, but the solution is simply a matter of lexical geography, and can be described in detail with once resorting to the crude blanket term of "culture".

Immediately after the war there was so little food in Japan they were forced to boil bark and eat it, and even had to eat the vile little freshwater crays native to their inland waterways call "zarigani". I once saw a very glossy brochure for Yabbies translated into Japanese and intended to create an export market for this new Australian gourmet food, and the translator has simply used the word zarigani! Causing feigned revulsion and hysterics in all Japanese readers. It is extremely unlikely that the clearly native speaking Japanese person who had translated it didn't know that people would react that way, but the reason it went to print was not lack of cultural knowledge, but lack of linguistic and translation skill.

Those skills must be brought to bear on every word a translator renders. And what noun, verb or adjective in any language has arrived completely independent of the formative influence of a social and physical environment?

At a more fundamental level, Giovanna Pistillo describes in "The Interpreter as Cultural Mediator" Hall's concept of High and low context cultures, with the high context requiring the provision of the least amount of explicit background information.
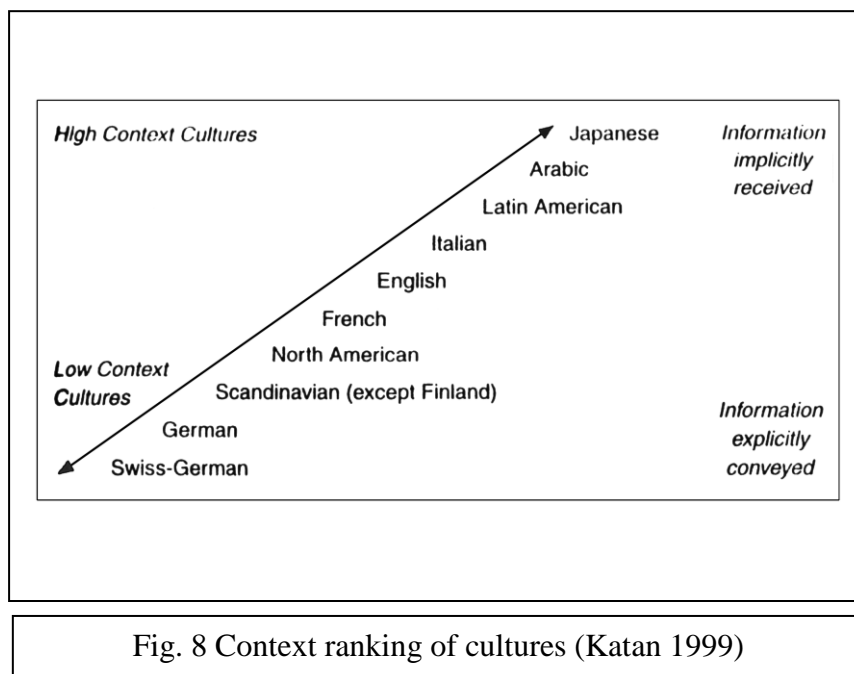

High Context Cultures   Japanese   *Information implicitly received*

Arabic

Latin American

Italian

English

French

North American

Low Context Cultures   Scandinavian (except Finland)

              German   *Information explicitly conveyed*

       Swiss-German

Fig. 8 Context ranking of cultures (Katan 1999)

In Katan's ranking of various languages[iv] Japanese comes in at the top. And verily the first thing I learnt about Japanese was that sentences do not require subjects. And yet on the whole the Japanese understand one another. In order to translate their speech into English however one spends all day interpolating, assuming and guessing what the subject is because without one the English sentence is naught but a predicate flapping in the wind.

Personal pronouns are good examples. The French are proud of the two that must be mastered, spare a thought for the Japanese with the nine I've been able to count.

The Japanese, millions of anal retentive people crammed onto an island and bound by centuries of feudalism to live in close quarters has turned Japanese language into an outstanding tool for the mediation of social relationships. Long before any data needs to be communicated, it is a ritual of acknowledgement of one's interlocutor's relative hierarchical position. Centuries of this have proved so fricken tedious that their solution was to omit personal pronouns altogether, and their language has learned to get along without subjects. Few people would point that out as a "cultural problem" because it is so pervasive. We're used to it and we know what to call it. I'm asking what part of which language hasn't been through that?

So are there any real cultural problems that translators must solve? I think there are, but the actual figures are grossly overstated for the reasons set out above.

My definition of a cultural problem is: it must be something that only the translator can see; that only they can solve; and that is damaging or exposing to needless risk the interests of one or other of the parties for whom they are translating. I agree with David Deck who yesterday advocated calling a recess and offering, at the client's own risk,

such advice as might assist. And this is on the grounds of civic duty, much the way you wouldn't do nothing while a neighbour's house burnt down because you're "not a fireman".

At the level of pragmatics there are more striking examples. A researcher asking questions of indigenous people that involved showing them photos of other indigenous people holding things, whose identity was not known to the researcher or relevant to the research, and who found that their respondents would not answer any of their questions until they knew who the person in the photo was and where they came from.

This is the flouting of a highly developed Gricean maxim of manner, found in many societies, where detailed knowledge of a person's identity and clan and tribal affiliations is required before sentences can be constructed. Certainly requires an ethical translator to suggest a chat off-line, rather than sit there blithely allowing the researcher to become more and more puzzled. But simply saying "there! A 'cultural' problem!" is rather too blunt a club to use for a professional translator.

What are the negative consequences of an alignment with Culture?

In striving to present and consolidate a clear public understanding of the core skill set of professional translators we must first clear some space by dismantling those that have been assumed and imposed on us from without, which consist of a variety of misconceptions, mostly along the lines that our presence is justified by some innate individual attribute such as our bilingualism, our ethnicity, our personality and so on.

In response to this prejudice our challenge is to base our entitlement to respect and reward on a complex and demanding set of skills that have been acquired through hard work and intelligence, neither of which are necessary accompaniments of any particular ethnicity or personality or of bilingualism.

We constantly battle against this. An officer of a magistrate's court in Melbourne pressuring a Vietnamese interpreter to stay past the time she was booked to do another job on the grounds that she would be "helping her countryman".

Professional interpreters need to confront these assumptions of socially beneficial racism with the clear message that our job is to help the legal process rather than any individual stakeholder, and if that sees a "countryman" to jail sooner, on safer grounds and less cost to the public then "here's my invoice"!

This is a hard battle to fight when many interpreters are distracted themselves by these arguments and volunteer as cultural brokers.

The problem with the rhetoric of cultural brokerage is that it inevitably entails outcomes not necessarily embraced or desired by the people involved in the communication.

In a discussion about these matters I was informed by a very righteous indigenous language interpreter that I "clearly didn't understand how important culture is to indigenous people". The two examples given were, one the family of a brain dead person was meeting the doctor who felt that further supply of food was pointless. In indigenous culture apparently people are loathe to speak of these matters let alone give their consent, so this interpreter, in their words, "helped the situation along".

The same interpreter also sought to illustrate their good works by reporting that they had refused to translate for an indigenous patient the advice that they had been

diagnosed with cancer, because "the preference in that culture is for the patient not to be told".

(Firstly it must be noted that working in indigenous languages entails an unfortunately high degree of professional isolation. Had this person met a few more practitioners in other languages they'd have found that the preferences cited are by no means unique to indigenous culture.)

But clearly this willing confusion of roles has also led here to some immediate drastic results. Ethically it is highly objectionable as it is dispossessing the patients of the autonomy to make decisions. No matter how traumatic these may, they are their decisions and only for them to make.

Well perhaps it would have taken a long time to reach that point. So the other ethical problem is that it is relieving doctors and other professional people of their duty to obtain good outcomes no matter the cultural diversity of the patients they treat. It is letting them off the hook.

To compound this the person reported that the cancer patient's doctor was Asian and "typically insensitive to cultural matters". Wasn't sure how to react to that one….

This is a serious clouding of what people would otherwise perceive as professional interpreting with judgements, the reliability of which is extremely tenuous. There is no course or qualification in cultural brokerage that interpreters necessarily take and acquire, so the professional services being provided here cannot effectively be integrated into a legal framework that would protect the interests of everyone involved, which is a fundamental requirement of Community domain T&I work, and highly desirable in the Business domain.

The assumption that just because someone is "from there", that they can offer professional advice on the behaviour of all people from there, is as bad as the assumption that just because you speak two languages, you can translate. And we struggle to destroy that idiotic notion..

Finally, making culture and cultural expertise an integral part of our professional identity also involves us in the purely political arguments of "multiculturalism". This is very foolish and short-sighted, because like all political arguments, the popularity of this one may well change in accordance with the whims of the general public. But there are very powerful arguments for the role of a strong and independent profession of translators which will always be valid and must be upheld regardless of political fashion.

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[i] "Trait theory" and "Theory of Control" cited in Holly Mikkelson's summary of Joseph Tseng's "*Interpreting as an Emerging Profession in Taiwan -- A Sociological Model*"

[ii] See the Indians' reference to themselves as "humans" in the movie "Little Big Man".

[iii] S. Phan and L. Bayly in interview with author

[iv] Katan, D. (1999) Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters, and Mediators. Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing (I haven't read this – I just used the diagram)