Disappointing Translation

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Abstract

The contribution translation can make for successful intercultural communication and globalization is most often discussed in positive terms: translation removes linguistic barriers and thus ensures cross-cultural rapprochement and exchange. Such a concept of translation obscures the fact that the removal of linguistic barriers can also make way for the disappointment of expectations in intercultural encounters. Most often such "disappointing translations" are degraded to "mistranslations", with the assumption that they inhibit intercultural communication, as they fail to achieve agreement. This paper will start from the counter-intuitive supposition that the disappointment of expectations can actually provide the initial stimulus for intercultural rapprochement. Against the background of this assumption, this study emphasizes the important and prolific role that disappointing translation plays for intercultural connectivity in globalizing processes. It will be demonstrated that the negative experience of non-fulfilment of expectations can motivate processes of self-reflection and auto-correction in cross-cultural relations.

Keywords: Translation theory, intercultural communication, globalization, Sunzi bingfa, pragmatic polysemy, cognitive style of expectation

Introduction

The contribution translation can make for successful intercultural communication is mostly discussed in positive terms: translation removes linguistic barriers, thus ensuring cross-cultural rapprochement and exchange. The aim of this paper is neither to deny the importance of translation for globalizing processes, nor to doubt that translation can actually be successful even under complex conditions. The aim of the following discussion is to demonstrate that, counter-intuitively, the vital momentum for intercultural interchangeability and connectivity can also be reached by the indirect way of unmet expectations of the involved parties. The underlying supposition is, however, that translation is the medium par excellence enabling the experience of disappointment of expectations in intercultural encounters. The term "disappointing translation" refers thus to translation processes that, by removing linguistic barriers, do not enable cross-cultural rapprochement in the first place, but give way instead to the disappointment of expectations. The thesis will be put forward that such negative experience can actually be the initial stimulus for intercultural rapprochement.

I will begin with some conceptual considerations to clarify a) the notion implied here of translation and b) the theoretical perspective that allows for a positive understanding of

unmet expectations for intercultural relations. Subsequent to these conceptual considerations, the paradoxical phenomenon of the vitalizing effects of the disappointment of expectations for cross-cultural relations will be illustrated by describing the transformation of China's image in the West and the economic interrelation between the two cultures as a result of translation processes and intercultural encounters. Despite a very intense and productive intercultural rapprochement in the 17th and 18th centuries, it can be shown that towards the end of the 19th century disappointment of expectations in economic relations evoked a very hostile attitude regarding China in the West. However, at the end of 20th century the West has adopted a quite modest and respectful attitude towards its Asian business partner. Two Western statements (one of the 19th and another of the 20th century) will illustrate the Western reaction to frustration and explanations for failed economic negotiations with the Chinese. Interestingly enough, the change of opinion at the end of the 20th century did not arise from the maximisation of consent in commercial communication. On the contrary, the frustration of the Westerners pushed them to find better explanations for the deficient situation. From a pragmatist point of view, the new Western interpretation of its own disadvantage in economic communication with China proved to be a prolific starting point for interaction, even if it proceeds from the wrong assumption. Furthermore, the new Western explanation of its own failure in commercial negotiations with the Chinese not only initiated a new culture of communication and interaction in the Western business world, but also in China. In the long run, it turns out that initially disappointing translation processes sparked the mutual adjustment of precepts for interaction in economic contexts. However, in order to appreciate the interrelation between disappointing translation processes and such adjustment of the conditions for cross-cultural communication, certain fundamental assumptions in the discourse of translation studies need to be revised.

Conceptual Considerations

The Concept of Translation

If we want to consider the role translation plays for intercultural connectivity in globalizing processes, models that focus on translation as mere representations of other texts will not prove to be very enlightening. Most often these approaches amount to nothing more than an account of what has been semantically lost or preserved. This approach is supported by the ever-lasting *conduit metaphor* (Reddy, 1979), which defines communication as *transporting* meaning in the form of *objects packed* into words, which serve as *containers*. The popular metaphors that conceptualize translation as *bridge-building*, or as *ferrying* foreign ideas and knowledge from one side of a *river* to another, or as *replanting foreign plants on new soil,* are all grounded in the *conduit metaphor* inasmuch as they all focus on the aspect of semantic transfer in translation processes. Translation concepts grounded in this metaphor presuppose that translation succeeds if the "meaning" of the original text has been safely *transported* into the target system, and if consent between the communication partners has been achieved. This supposition corroborates the persistent assumption inherent to the discourse of translation studies, namely that accurate translation prevents intercultural misunderstanding. In fact, the role that translation plays in cross-cultural relations is most often reduced to its assumed conciliating potential. The reverse

of this assumption is that if the translation process is unsatisfying or leads to conflict, it is to be considered either as "non-translation" or as "mistranslation". This supposition leads to a very normative and consensual concept of translation ignoring the fact that actually it can be precisely translation that enables conflicts in intercultural communication.

The conciliating notion of translation dovetails with folk theoretical conviction about intercultural communication, implying that what inhibits rapprochement in the first place are the linguistic barriers. Consequently, the expectations are high that the possibility of understanding the culturally "other" linguistically will ensure a common basis for the smooth exchange of knowledge, ideas and prospect. As a result, translations that enable conflictual communication must be considered as "mistranslation" or "non-translation" since they obviously failed to *transport* the right meaning of the original across the linguistic border. However, what truly matters when discussing the role of translation in intercultural relations is not so much what has been lost or preserved from the original meaning; much more relevant would seem to be the consequences that the translational act has for these intercultural relations in terms of communication and interaction. With this view in mind, the conceptual focus in this paper does not lie in the difficulty of *semantic polysemy* in translation processes (as in traditional notions of translation conceptually based on the metaphor of transfer) but in *pragmatic polysemy*. Of interest here is not so much whether a certain meaning has been transferred "correctly", but how the translated information is processed in the reception system, i.e., what consequences it has in the long run. In as much as cross-cultural exchange is not a linguistic or textual phenomenon but above all a matter of communication, only such a perspective that dissociates from a purely linguistic or textual concept of translation will provide insight into the importance that translation actually has for intercultural exchange.

The approach to translation not only as a linguistic but as an (inter)cultural and communicative phenomenon emerged in the 1970s, when translation studies emancipated as a discipline from linguistics and attempted to approach translation as a form of intercultural communication (Toury, 1980, 1995; Vermeer, 1978, 1996). This approach involved a critical discussion of so called "source-oriented" models, which focus on the source text (the "original") or on the relation between source text and the target text (the translation). The main argument of the critics was that such "source-oriented" models sustain a notion of ideal translation that does not correspond to the translational reality, insofar as translation could never be equivalent to the source text. However, translation is not "a construct created and/or dictated by theoreticians", as one of the most severe critics in the field, Gideon Toury (1978, p. 27), points out. Translation proceeds independent of our professional or academic ideas of ideal translations. Target-oriented models, such as Toury's *Descriptive Translation Studies* (*DTS*) or Vermeer's *Skopostheory* (to name just two of the most systematic and influential in the discipline), proceed from the assumption that translation can only be described and analysed against the backdrop of its reception situation, since it is the reception pole that determines the conditions under which translation succeeds and fulfils the communicative function for which it has been produced.

The *pragmatist* notion of translation implied in this paper clearly builds on the delineated principles of target-oriented models, yet takes them a step further. Traditional target-oriented approaches are concerned with the reception environment of translation insofar as it provides information about the factors governing the translator's decisions and the conditions under

which translation can fulfil its intended function. Their notion of translation processes remains limited, however; according to the traditional target-oriented perspective, the translation process ends with the (non-) fulfilment of its function in the target system. I am interested, however, in what happens afterwards: Which communicative processes enable translation once linguistic barriers have been removed and (linguistic) understanding has been made possible? This is actually the crucial moment in intercultural communication. Consequently, from a theoretical point of view, the thesis that disappointing translations potentially contribute to intercultural interchangeability and connectivity can only be treated with a broader concept of the translation process in mind. **This entails thinking of the communicative consequences of translation as conceptually belonging to the translation process itself.** According to this perspective, misunderstandings, disapproval and disappointment belong to the translation process just as much as affirmation and agreement (Heller, 2008). Only with such a broader notion of translational processes at hand, will it be possible to look beyond the disappointment enabled by translation and to appreciate why intercultural communication keeps going and can actually have a positive outcome, even if translation does not provide the basis for the prolific exchange at first. In the next section, I will outline the important role that unmet expectations play in cross-cultural relations.

Disappointed Expectation in Positive Terms

In the philosophy of science the disappointment of expectation and the experience that certain theoretical convictions and presuppositions prove to be useless, dysfunctional or untrue are considered as the vital momentum for scientific innovation (Popper, 1972; Fleck, 1979; Kuhn, 1996). Karl Popper illustrated the heuristic productivity of disappointed expectations by comparing it with

> […] the experience of a blind man who touches, or runs into, an obstacle, and so becomes aware of its existence. It is through the falsification of our suppositions that we actually get in touch with 'reality'. (1972, p. 360)

This means that the fertile momentum in the search for knowledge and insight is not so much the solution of the problem itself, but the creation of a new space in which new questions and doubts can possibly arise. The heuristic productivity of unmet expectations is not only true to the academic world, but for the social world in general. There is no need to revise our own convictions and assumptions about the world, the corresponding expectations and precepts for interaction, as long as they prove to be applicable to a situation and conducive to successful communication and interaction. Only when our expectations come to nothing, i.e., when our patterns of interpretation and behaviour prove to be useless to cope with a situation and to accomplish a purpose, are we motivated to reconsider the validity of our orientation-patterns designed for a specific situation. This experience is typical for intercultural encounters, insofar as these orientation patterns are highly culture-bound, as the German sociologist Alfred Schuetz demonstrates in his renowned essay *The stranger* (1944). However, whether the experience of deficiency will lead to the adjustment of expectations and the revision of

what Schuetz calls the "scheme of interpretation" and "guide for interaction" certainly depends upon how individual actors or societies deal with such frustration. The prominent exponent of sociological system theory, Niklas Luhmann (1969), points to only two possible reactions to non-fulfilment of expectations: either actors hold on to the expectation they started with even if it comes to nothing ("normative style of expectation"); or they revise their starting expectation, trying thus to re-align it to the given situation in order to avoid further frustrations ("cognitive style of expectation"). Both styles of expectations are indispensable for the functioning of social systems. The *normative style* is essential for the reduction of contingency without which communication would come to a deadlock due to the unlimited options for proceeding (p. 40). The *cognitive style of expectation* instead fosters the adaptability of social systems to new conditions for communication. The relevance of this last style of expectation for intercultural interchangeability is not hard to find and will be illustrated in the next section. However, the important thing to keep in mind here is that the cognitive style of expectation is only challenged by a deficient situation, in our case: the disappointment of expectations.

Regarding cross-cultural communication, translation can be considered the most important medium enabling the experience of socio-cultural differences in the first place. Only where a basic (linguistic) understanding is possible, will social actors involved in intercultural situations be able to designate a certain communicative behaviour of the other as "different" and qualify it as "unexpected" (in a positive or negative sense). What is significantly different and potentially relevant for appreciating one's own disappointment of expectations in intercultural situations comes into view in translation processes. In this sense, disappointing translation can fulfil an heuristic function in cross-cultural interrelation as it brings the communication partners in the position to experience differing conditions for interaction and to possibly reconsider their ready-hand schemes for interpreting the situation, as well as the appropriate expectations and ideas of right or wrong behaviour.

The Transformation of Intercultural Disappointment

With the arrival of the French Jesuits in China in 1688, a flood of literature about China as well as translated Chinese literature was opened to the European public. By the middle of the 18th century, France and Germany, for example, were better informed about China than they were about some countries at the periphery of Europe, as stated by the renowned German historian Jürgen Osterhammel (1998, p. 99). China was not merely regarded as a realm of wonders and mystical wisdom, nor was enthusiasm for Asia only motivated by a desire for entertainment, but also by a thirst for knowledge (p. 143). Chinese literature was read for serious studies on the history of civilization and anthropology. In other words, an anti-ethnocentric atmosphere prevailed in eighteenth-century Europe (pp. 70-71). European intellectuals deemed Chinese literature so valuable that they circulated the opinion that the important task for Westerners exploring Asia should not be to write *about* China but rather to translate its texts in order to make them "directly" accessible to the European public. This explains why a high number of translations emerged in this period (p. 170). The idea was to promote mutually beneficial cooperation and exchange on both scientific and philosophical levels. By the 19th century, however, these progressive, genuinely scientific and humanistic interests gave way to narrow

imperialistic concerns and resentment, eventually leading to a rather xenophobic attitude (p. 20), and transformed into unilateral imperialistic claims (p. 174). The following complaints made in 1894 by a missionary, Arthur Henderson Smith, refer to the particular difficulties in economic relations between China and the West and indicate this poisonous atmosphere:

> Much of the incomprehensibility of the Chinese, so far as foreigners are concerned, is due to their insincerity. We cannot be sure what they are after. […] One never has any assurance that a Chinese ultimatum is ultimate. This proposition, so easily stated, contains in itself the germ of multidious anxieties for the trader, the traveller, and the diplomatist. (Smith, 1907, p. 272)

Translators were always involved in official negotiations in China, not least because the Chinese considered "pantomimic communication" as indecent (Osterhammel, 1998, p. 134). Thus, the "incomprehensibility" of the Chinese communication partner was not a matter of language, as the statement implies. The linguistic borders have been removed by translation, enabling the communication partners to begin negotiation in the first place. But this possibility provided by translation obviously does not result in beneficial exchange of business ideas and concepts about commercial performance; instead, the possibility of understanding (linguistically) enables the Western communication partners to realize that their expectations (supposedly) appropriate to the situation come to nothing. The conclusion that it is the Chinese "insincerity" that inhibits the negotiations reveals a normative style of expectation (as explicated in the previous section) on the part of the Western partners: They hold on to the expectations resulting from their culture-bound "schemes of orientation" (Schuetz, 1944) that provide them with a ready-hand interpretation of the typical situation of "commercial negotiation" and the appropriate "recipes" (Schuetz, 1944) designed for this special form of social interaction. Consequently, since the Chinese do not act as Westerners expect commercial partners to act in this typical situation, the Chinese behaviour is interpreted as inappropriate according to the Western view.

Through the translation and reception of works such as the above-quoted *Chinese Characteristics* of Arthur Henderson Smith, this new image of the "cunning" and "deceitful" Chinese replaced the image of the wise and sapient Chinese in the West. China was not ignorant of its image abroad, however. Lu Xun, who read the Japanese translation of *Chinese Characteristics,* urged for a Chinese translation in order to confront China with its Western 19th century image, and to arouse his fellow Chinese (Kempa, 2010, p. 13, p. 215). The Western observation of the Chinese boomeranged back to China and provided it with a mirror of the disappointment of Western expectations by Chinese behaviour. In other words: China was confronted through translation with the Western interpretation of Chinese behaviour in business situations. Understandably enough, this translated mirror did not immediately contribute to an improvement of intercultural relations, but hardened the fronts in the first place.

Approximately 100 years later, however, we see a considerable transformation of the Western scheme of interpretation regarding economic encounters with China. Instead of hostile accusation about the "inappropriate" behaviour of the Chinese in negotiations, a modest intercultural comparison of commercial efficiency gets made that attributes inferiority to the

West in economic contexts. In 1996, German management consultant Andreas Drosdek admits that,

> […] during the treaties with China and the aspiring Four Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong), Western decision-makers encounter on every occasion expert and resolute negotiation partners who are skilled at profiting enormously from their relationship with the West. More often than not, Western expectations need to be revised and strikingly reduced. At the moment, the West has little to counter the strategic abilities of China. (as cited in Kempa, 2010, p. 14 [my translation])

We observe here a different handling of frustration during business interactions and a dissociation of the old culture-bound scheme of interpretation and the associated expectations: Western partners no longer react to the disappointment of their anticipations by insisting on their definition of the situation and the appropriate behaviour that had led them to the conviction that the Chinese partners were acting immorally in business situations. They now question if their expectations are justifiable in the first place. In Luhmann's (1969) terms, Drosdek's statement signals a cognitive style of expectation. What must have motivated this new approach to the problem of constant frustration in business relations with China is the awareness that the scheme of interpretation valid in negotiation contexts with Westerners was not applicable for the negotiation situation with Chinese and thus did not prove efficient to serve as a basis for designing a prolific guide for interaction. The recurring experience of non-compliance of expectation has obviously motivated Western businessmen to question what has been taken for granted concerning negotiation contexts so far. In this sense, the disappointing experiences initiated a process of self-reflection.

The situation of deficiency was thus reinterpreted by the West, which abandoned the idea that its failure was caused by the "inappropriate" business performance of the Chinese partners. The new interpretation was instead that it is rather the Western idea of commercial behaviour that is evidently impractical for negotiations with China. The awareness of China's (supposed) strategic backlog in business triggered the Western ambition to appreciate the Chinese conditions for economic communication, to find the presumed Chinese "recipe" for strategic performance, and eventually to adopt it in order to be able to compete with its Asian partners. The German sinologist, Thomas Kempa (2010, p. 14), explores a curious Western theory that (supposedly) explains the commercial advantage that the Chinese hold, namely their application of the principles of the renowned work on military strategies and tactics of ancient China, *Sunzi bingfa* (孙子兵法, *Art of Warfare*), to economic strategies.[1] This inference eventually led to the diffusion of *Sunzi bingfa* in Western business literature through translations and adaptations of the *Art of Warfare*. Contrary to assumptions in the West, however, the explicit implementation

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[1] Sunzi (孙子) or Sun Wu (孙武) was a military general, strategist and philosopher in ancient China, who is believed to have authored *Sunzi bingfa*. Whether Sunzi was an actual historical figure is still questioned by historians. Historians who do believe in his existence presume that he lived around 500BC. For more details about this historical quarrel, see Kempa (2010, p. 23f).

of *Sunzi bingfa* into economic contexts in China did not happen before the end of the 20th century, and was only incentivized from abroad!2 In fact, the Chinese motivation to "translate" *Sunzi bingfa* into economic semantics, that is, to exploit *Sunzi bingfa* for economic strategies, was not as the West assumed. On the contrary: the Chinese felt themselves left far behind in the economic competition with the West (Kempa, 2010, p. 15). Therefore, they intended to introduce Western business knowledge in order to reform the Chinese economic system, and believed that by combining the new Western concepts with "ancestral wisdom", i.e., with *Sunzi bingfa*, they could revitalize and strengthen Chinese tradition and culture. In other words, and to make this point clear: The difficult negotiations between China and the West motivated on both sides the processes of self-reflection and auto-correction, insofar as they mutually tried to adjust to the conditions for economic communication in the other culture by observing the other and its differing precepts for interaction in business contexts. The Westerners prepared for economic communication with China by "translating" (as they assumed their Chinese partners would) Chinese strategic knowledge, as exposed in *Sunzi bingfa*, into commercial strategies. In turn, China prepared for the Western conditions for business interaction: the adaptation of *Sunzi bingfa* to commercial strategies was considered the right medium for introducing Western business knowledge without destabilizing the socio-political system. In one sense, then, China rediscovered its own tradition mirrored in Western commercial practices, thus reinforcing its position as an economic power in the West (Kempa, 2010, p.15, pp.119-165).

This illustration of the transformation of China's image in the West and of economic relations between the two cultures is meant to highlight the positive effect that disappointing translation processes can have for intercultural relations in the long run. Although non-compliance of expectations certainly does not guarantee the positive results of translation, the experience of unrealized anticipations has the potential to stimulate processes of self-reflection and auto-correction (cognitive style of expectations), giving rise to new possibilities for communicative connections, as witnessed in the global economic relationship between China and the West. Participation in global communication processes is obviously not determined by the assimilation of socio-cultural values. What is required, instead, is the ability to appreciate differing cultural forms of life and their conditions for communication and interaction in order to make their expectations predictable in relevant situations. Thus, participation in a *world society* (Luhmann, 1982) does not mean sharing the same socio-cultural convictions; it means adopting a certain cognitive attitude. This attitude is characterized by an appreciation of the cultural other in its differing relatedness to shared contexts, and an awareness of its differing

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2 In his impressive study examining the emergence of so-called "*Sunzi* business literature" in China and the West, Kempa (2010, pp. 83-87) demonstrates, however, that some implicit considerations regarding the usefulness of *The Art of Warfare* in commercial contexts had already appeared much earlier in Chinese commentaries on *Sunzi bingfa*. However, the 1984-published *Sunzi bing fa yu qi ye guan li* (孙子兵法与企业管理) written by Li Shijun, Yang Xianju & Qin Jiarui (李世俊, 杨先举 和 覃家瑞著) is considered to be the first explicit implementation of *Sunzi bingfa* in business literature in PRC China (Kempa, 2010, p. 100). The English translation appeared in 1990 as *"Sun Wu's Art of War" and the Art of Business Management*.

conditions for communication within a specific situation (Stichweh, 2001, p. 124; Nassehi, 1998, p. 162). Only the adoption of such an attitude and the disposition for a cognitive style of expectation will enable socio-cultural systems to establish a common and solid basis for interaction and exchange. And it is precisely the continuity of translation processes that fosters the development of this attitude, in as much as, regarding cross-cultural relations, translation is the primary medium to enable the experience of differing conditions for communication (Heller, 2010).

Conclusion

When considering communication processes between culturally very distant partners, the argument of *untranslatability* appears to be a commonplace. Whenever translation becomes difficult or leads to recurring misunderstandings and disappointments, the discussion comes very quickly to an end with the knockout argument of untranslatability. The pragmatist perspective on disappointing translation as adopted in this paper not only avoids this argumentative deadlock; it also points to the absurdity of the idea of untranslatability between distant cultures, exposing it as constructivist or philological coquetery that may be flattering in artistic contexts, insofar as it vaunts the uniqueness of languages and styles. In terms of *world society*, however, the claim of untranslatability amounts to cultural, socio-political and economic (self)exclusion. The assertion of the impossibility of translation proceeds from the erroneous assumption that untranslatability exists *prior* to translation. This presupposition obscures the fact that such an assertion can only be the resigning conclusion *after* disappointing translation processes take place, referring thus not to the factuality of translation but to the (unrealized) intentions and expectations of the involved actors (translators, employers, clients, receiver, etc.). However, as long as communication continues, and as long as disappointing translation processes are the starting point for further communication and the development of new expectations, they do not inhibit, but rather stimulate intercultural exchanges. The disappointment of expectations is not a sign that the end of the road has been reached. What actually constitutes the impasse of intercultural communication processes is rather the "capitulation", in translational terms: the resigning claim of untranslatability.

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