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Globalization, advertising and promotional translation

Ira Torresi

Introduction

The translation of advertising and promotional discourse is closely linked to globalization. Commercial advertising and promotional genres have the specific purpose of persuading buyers to buy more of a given product or service. Not too dissimilarly, the purpose of non-commercial advertising and promotion (such as awareness-raising, institutional or political campaigns) is to influence people's attitudes about a given institution, or issue or candidate. The purpose of translated promotional and advertising texts, then, is to reach out to more prospective buyers, or people to be influenced, in other language communities. One might oversimplify the latter statement by arguing that 'advertising and promotion are translated to sell more (or persuade more people) internationally'. The equation between 'in other language communities' and 'internationally', however, has become increasingly complicated, whether one looks at it from the angle of marketing, culture or language use.

Let us start from the marketing aspect of the matter. Since international trade is increasingly seen as a global affair rather than a mere sum of the business exchanges between each individual seller and their respective target markets, it only seems logical for international advertising and promotion (and their translation) to become globalized as well. A promotional text or campaign may now be shared and circulated by users of social media and other forms of instant communication across national, class, and age boundaries, thus reaching beyond the market it was originally intended for. For marketers to maximize this kind of effect, however, addressees must be able to *understand* the text or campaign – which is where translation comes in.

The globalization of markets, understood as the removal of boundaries between the places – whether physical or virtual – where business exchanges occur, does not erase local languages and cultures. More likely, it increases the participation of people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the same *loci* of business, as businesspeople or as customers (or both). These people may find a common language and a common market culture to share their common business experiences, but such experiences will inevitably be influenced by the participants' languages and cultural identities, as well as by the linguistic, social and cultural settings in which these experiences happen.

Moreover, end-users and retail consumers may be unaware of the workings of market economics, and react only to those promotional stimuli that touch *their own* emotions by relying on familiar social and cultural values that are culture- and tradition-bound. Pervasive advertising can gradually and collectively push new values through, but in order to do so, it needs to leverage the familiar value system, grafting the new values in, rather than uprooting and replacing the old ones. This accounts for the fact that, even in the face of trade globalization, much advertising and promotion are still translated or recreated (pick any of the terms discussed in the next section) into target languages and cultures that may or may not outline separate markets.

Rather than with markets as abstractions, promotional genres deal with people, their addressees, and with largely pre-logical behaviours that compel them to buy a product, a service, or an idea. A retrospective meta-analysis of 880 advertising campaigns that received an IPA Effectiveness Award suggests that one of the strategies underlying their long-term success was to rely on emotional rather than rational or logical claims (Binet and Field 2009, 2013). At present, it seems that such pre-logical, emotional consumer behaviours are not going to be unifiable into universals soon: ‘although there is a worldwide convergence of technology, media, and financial systems, desires and behaviours of consumers are not converging’ (de Mooij 2013: 2). In order for promotion to be effective across boundaries, then, translation is still key, with scholars tracing the very possibility of market globalization to translation: ‘without translation, the global capitalist consumer-oriented and growth-fixated economy would not be possible’ (House 2015: 102); ‘translation [...] is what makes globalization a reality’ (Cronin 2013: 21).

For the time being, then, the translation (or localization, transcreation) of advertising and promotional texts remains useful for the purposes of influencing retail consumption or end-user behaviour, and non-translation remains a deliberate translation choice that actually presupposes a pre-translation of the source text so as to tailor it to a trans-national consumer base (Sections ‘*Localizing, adapting, transcreating, rewriting: the terminology of advertising translation in the era of global trade*’ and ‘*Advertising translation and cultural variation – an accelerator of globalization?*’). In any case, however, advertising and promotional translation tends to deal with the cross-cultural variation of social norms and values that are not confined by geographical and political boundaries, but travel with the people who carry them along with their language pools.

Localizing, adapting, transcreating, rewriting: the terminology of advertising translation in the era of global trade

The translation of promotional and advertising texts has traditionally been recognized as a highly ‘creative’ or ‘free’ kind of translation, both in academic and professional circles. This is all the more true for the translation of business-to-consumer (B2C) advertisements, a short text genre (Eco 2002) that is fraught with ‘given-for-granted’ cultural and social values and stereotypes (Torresi 2004, 2007). Such stereotypes tend to be invisible to addressees, including translators themselves. Yet, the failure to identify them and replace them, if necessary, with other stereotypes that are more relevant for the target consumer group may result in a target text that, however linguistically correct and faithful to the apparent text functions of the original, defies a persuasive purpose that is measured in terms of actual purchases (Torresi 2017: 19; ‘se traduit par des actes réels d’achat’, Guidère 2000: 62).

In an attempt to clearly set it apart from translation realms that focus on the more or less ‘faithful’ interlingual rendition of the source message, advertising and promotional translation,

whose loyalty lies more with the persuasive function of the text than with the information content of the message, has been variously termed ‘localization’ (Valdés 2008; Declercq 2011), ‘adaptation’ (Cruz-García 2018) or, especially in professional practice, ‘rewriting’ or ‘transcreation’ (Ray and Kelly 2010; Katan 2016; Benetello 2018). Agencies specializing in the translation of promotional and advertising texts may actually circulate job announcements looking for copywriters in the target languages with good reading skills in the source language, rather than professional translators, probably following the tenet that in advertising as well as in the language industry, ‘the most effective way to make a product truly international is to make it look and feel like a product in the target country’ (Sprung 2000: xiv).

It should be mentioned that the terms ‘adaptation’, ‘rewriting’, ‘localization’, ‘transcreation’ mentioned earlier are actually listed as separate ‘value added’ services that can be offered by translation service providers under the 2015 ISO 17100 standard (Annex F). What all such terms have in common, however, is that they refer to a translation approach that transcends the interlinguistic translation of the verbal copy and embraces all the semiotic modes of expression in which the text is encoded (including print images, video, website structure, voices) as well as the cultural stereotypes it conveys. Whether described as localizer, adapter, transcreator or re-(copy)writer, the advertising translator is clearly one that is able to produce a target text that works as an advertisement in its own right and is capable of achieving the desired effect on the target consumer groups (Fuentes Luque and Kelly 2000, Smith 2008). Accordingly, advertising translation classroom practices are often described as transcending the merely linguistic elements of the text while embracing multimodality and intersemioticity, as well as cultural awareness and consumer orientation (González Davies 2004: 124 and 133–134; Laviosa 2007; Kong 2012; Enríquez-Aranda and Jiménez-Carra 2016).

Advertising translation and cultural variation – an accelerator of globalization?

The burden of transforming the text in the way described earlier, however, does not rest solely on the advertising translators, meant as the persons or teams who produce a target text in a different language. Within large corporations, the source texts for advertising and communication campaigns are increasingly designed with a global audience in mind. Such texts are usually in English and avoid culture-specificity as much as possible. They may be designed to be circulated worldwide without changes (or with minor ones), in what is termed a ‘global’ marketing approach that requires keeping verbal messages short and simple (Valdés 2016: 136–137), classic examples being Coca Cola’s ‘Happiness’ or ‘Enjoy’ campaigns or – before the ban on cigarette advertising – Philip Morris’s ‘Welcome to Marlboro Country’ commercials. Or conversely, they may function as raw materials to be transcreated locally in order to best suit local markets, in so-called ‘glocal’ marketing. Glocalization may happen irrespective of whether the local language is the same that is used in the source text. For instance, the English-language *Ur*-text of an ad created globally for the sole purpose of localization would need transcreating into the British and US markets, respectively, especially if the product being advertised has a different market positioning in the two countries. This is what happened, for instance, with advertisements for Oil of Olay’s Total Effects Anti-Blemish Moisturizer circulated simultaneously in the British and US versions of *Marie Claire* in December 2005 (Torresi 2008), which used different visuals and referred to completely different sets of values in connection with women’s beauty and ageing. While the British version, whose visual embodied elegance and perfection, mentioned ‘blemishes and the signs of ageing’, the American one played on humour, musing on ‘wrinkles and pimples’ and ‘split-personality skin’.

In this process, which mirrors the ‘think globally, act locally’ motto (Adab 2000: 224), the preparation of the original ‘multitext’ (Guidère 2009, 2011) may also be regarded as a form of translation or pre-translation. For this reason, the marketing and advertising teams that design the source campaign may largely benefit from the inclusion of translators as advisors on how to best avoid culture specificity in the source text, in order to ensure easier translation to different locales (Vandal-Sirois 2013: 142–143).

It should be pointed out that the global (i.e. untranslated) and glocal advertising approaches are possible only for corporations with local marketing offices that are capable of, respectively, monitoring the reception of the global campaign, or suiting the non-culture-specific source text to their respective local markets. These approaches are also relatively recent. In older times, long before the concept of globalization came to the fore (approximately until the 1980s), Western corporations did not show such a high sensitivity towards cultural diversity, arguably because non-Western markets were considered to have marginal buying capacity. Still, their promotional and advertising texts were translated to reach out to those largely ‘virgin’ markets, thus selling Western values and imagery along with Western products. In fact, diachronic studies in advertising and promotional translation show how the introduction of the advertising and promotional genres, largely translated from other languages, has helped shape local cultures in many ways, paving the way for the present-day ‘global’ base of knowledges, values and images that one takes largely for granted today. Huang (2014), for instance, describes how advertisements for Western or Western-like medicines introduced Western medical concepts into the early twentieth-century Chinese popular culture, where they mingled with the traditional Chinese conceptualizations of the human body, its ailments and possible treatments. Ločmele (2016) points out that positively connoted foreign cultural values were introduced in the Latvian collective imagination through translated promotional texts in the 1920s and 1930s, before commercial advertising ceased to exist in the Second World War and then Soviet periods of Latvian history. More examples of this kind will be presented in Section ‘Critiques of advertising translation as an instrument of colonialism(s)’, because they adopt a distinctively critical, feminist or postcolonial stance.

If the globalizing effect of advertising on the recipient social value system has been pointed out for interlingually translated texts, then some reflections are also in order in the light of the relatively recent trend towards non-translation (Prieto del Pozo 2009; Nemčoková 2011; Páez Rodríguez 2013; Comitre Narváez 2015). We have already mentioned earlier that the choice of non-translation is the result of a translation process in its own right – albeit the process is initiated within marketing departments rather than by translators. Shifting to the end-user’s point of view, however, the very spread of non-translated ads whose verbal texts are in English, and the evidence of English being the first (or only) choice whenever a promotional website is made available in a second language for international audiences, seems to consolidate the status of English as *the* global language. The association is never explicitly argued for; it is taken for granted and has a normative effect, just like the cultural stereotypes and social values so heavily relied upon in advertising (Torresi 2005). Thus, the choice not to translate may be perceived by addressees as a reinforcement of the stereotype of English being, *having to be*, the language that should be used and understood by all humankind. One might think about other languages that could claim global primacy over English, at least in certain domains usually linked to country-of-origin (COO) effect, as in the case of French for perfume advertising. This use of languages other than English linked to cultural connotations, however, has been dwindling since the 1990s (Snell-Hornby 2006: 140). When one looks in depth at the countries where such languages are used, moreover, one finds that

there, too, advertisers have recently been relying on English language and Anglo-world imagery to appeal to local consumers (Martin 2006). Similar usages of English or Western non-translated brand names are spreading and becoming the preferred option even in China, a market traditionally reliant on heavy cultural adaptation to boost product sales (Xuechuan He 2018: 507).

The very presence of the same advertising texts in English across different language, social and cultural communities is far from being a neutral fact whose effects pertain only to the linguistic domain. It is something that changes our very way of thinking – a small shift in what Blommaert (2005: 73) calls ‘orders of indexicality’ that shape our perception of normalcy. Cumulatively taken, such shifts may facilitate the gradual homogenizing of discourses and values across cultures, which some scholars have linked to colonial and postcolonial ethnocentric attitudes towards Otherness. They may also lead to an increasing normalization of translanguaging practices.

One should not forget, however, that even when campaigns are designed to be circulated globally in the same language through all media (including the internet, in-app advertising and social media), they ‘reveal social representations and certain investments in the collective imaginary [...] They forge worlds in the realm of the imaginary’ (Hoff and Anzanello Carrascoza 2013: 152–3). This power to shape collective imagination may lead to forms of cultural colonization, which the feminist, critical or postcolonial translation studies that are the foci of the following section usually identify as proceeding from hegemonic agents rooted in capitalist Western cultures to substantially less empowered consumers living across the planet.

Critiques of advertising translation as an instrument of colonialism(s)

As mentioned earlier, globalizing advertising strategies that circulate the same campaign worldwide, as well as translations of commercial campaigns that carry non-indigenous cultural values, have been exposed as instruments of colonialism by a relatively recent strand of translation scholars. Such critical readings of advertising translation focus on the cultural and gender stereotyping it may promote in addressees, highlighting how it can turn into an instrument of corporations’ hegemonic power over individuals and their value systems. Critical discursive studies explicitly or implicitly make reference to the Critical Discourse Analysis tradition that is championed by Fairclough (1989, 1995) and is based on the concepts of hegemony (Gramsci 1977: 2346) and voice (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Blommaert 2005: 68). Examples of similarly critical studies include Calzada Pérez (2005) on the ideological implications of Coca Cola and McDonald advertising in Africa; Mao Sihui (2009) on orientalizing advertisements for real estate in the Guangdong area; del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck (2008, 2009), Torresi (2004, 2012) on gender stereotyping; and Lotfollahi et al. (2015) for a critical discursive analysis of cosmetic and hygiene product advertising translated into Persian. Smith (2010: 53–54), conversely, identifies the translator as the agent that is colonized by the Western corporations that advertise their products in Russia. This view implicitly acknowledges translators’ status as the first recipients of the texts they translate and as disadvantaged members of the market, rather than highlighting their alleged responsibility or agency in perpetuating a hegemonic power that they do not, after all, partake in.

In some of the studies that use translated advertising as materials carrying cultural or ethnic representations, a critical stance may not be openly stated, but the influence of postcolonial studies or Orientalism may still be traced. Orientalism (Said 1978; Sardar 1999) exposes ethnic Otherness as a social and cultural product of a gaze that is grounded within the gazer’s culture. Instances of this critical stance are the works of Chiaro (2004, 2009) or Chiaro and

Rossato (2015) on the representation of Italianness, and Di Giovanni (2008: 38–40) on the portrayal of India and Indians in Italian advertising.

An interesting subset of critical and feminist readings of advertising translation refers to classroom practices where translated or comparative advertising is used for practical applications of Critical Discourse Analysis (Vid and Kučič 2015), to expose gender images as socially and culturally constructed (Corrius Gimbert et al. 2016a), and as a means to stimulate reflection on situated learning and situated knowledges (Corrius Gimbert et al. 2016b).

The globalization of advertising translation studies

Globalization has made an additional contribution to advertising translation studies. The opening of traditionally closed state economies to Western-style capitalism, with their coda of booming promotional translation mainly between English and Chinese, has led to an emerging Asian ‘school’ of translation scholars. Typically, this group of researchers deal with issues that specifically relate to the translation of Western brand names into ideograms and the reverse – translation of ideogram-based Chinese brands to non-Asian countries. Both processes carry deep semiotic and cultural implications and offer plenty of food for thought, as witnessed by the abundance of studies on brand name translation into and from Chinese – to mention only a few English-language examples that may be easily accessed by an international readership (Dong and Helms 2001; He Chuansheng and Xiao Yunnan 2003; Qiong Wang 2003; Jing Wang 2009; Hwang 2011; Kum et al. 2011; Ying Cui 2017). Several more studies may be available to readers of Chinese.

Research on the translation of advertising carried out by Asian scholars is typically published in marketing-centred Asian journals and edited books, pioneering a multidisciplinary trend that is not equally popular outside of Asia (see Section ‘Areas of interdisciplinary interest’). To detail one example, Jing Jiang and Ran Wei (2012), published in the *International Marketing Review*, collected a corpus of 210 print advertisements of products of Asian, European and North American multinational corporations. The authors conducted content analysis, with special focus on the use of Western versus non-Western cultural cues, to compare their varying degrees of standardization in creative strategy and execution (i.e. whether the campaign could be conceived as global, glocal or local).

Even when it is solidly focused on the translators’ rather than marketers’ perspective, Asian research on the translation of promotional texts seems more open to incorporating marketing concepts and concerns, as in George Ho’s (2008) call for a (monetary) value-driven theory of translation. According to Ho, only by speaking their employers’ language – money – will commercial translators be able to have their hard work and talents recognized. Since successful translations bring an increased profit to the end client, the translator should charge accordingly higher prices for promotional translation work, which would, in turn, make its value more relevant for the commissioner.

Areas of interdisciplinary interest

So far, we have discussed the impact of globalization within the realm of translation studies. It should be pointed out, however, that the practice of advertising translation (and translation in general) is likely to be impacted by globalization phenomena taking place *outside* its traditional boundaries, and that may demand further points of interdisciplinary contact. I will mention here two areas whose progress may deserve advertising translation scholars’ particular attention – international marketing and translanguaging.

With the exception of the Asian school of advertising translation studies briefly mentioned earlier, and of Hofstede's and De Mooij's studies in the cultural aspects of international marketing (Hofstede 1991, 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; De Mooij 2003, 2004, 2013), much needs to be done to secure a firm grounding of marketing principles within advertising translation studies. Key concepts such as COO effect (Klein et al. 1998; Johnson 2009; Maher and Carter 2011; Oberecker and Diamantopoulos 2011; Amatulli et al. 2019), for instance, are seldom taken into account in translation studies, even when analysing case studies that clearly relate to such concepts. COO is the set of qualities that consumers typically associate – or are led to associate – with a product or brand only because that product or brand (actually or allegedly) comes from a certain country. The qualities stereotypically associated with that country (e.g. being 'in fashion' for France or Italy; mechanic or engineering precision for Germany or Japan) are therefore transferred to those products or brands that come or are said (or implied) to come from that country. In translation discourse about products or tourist destinations being presented as 'the real thing', however, COO is seldom explicitly mentioned as such, while similar considerations stemming from linguistic and semiotic cues, following the example of the Panzani ad mentioned by Barthes (1957), may come more readily to the researcher's mind. This, however, risks making research circular within the realm of translation studies and its cognate disciplines, rather than expanding outside the humanities and learning to use more synthetic and fruitful concepts belonging to international marketing.

Another concept that could be similarly useful for advertising and promotional translation studies, but is not systematically referred to, is consumer ethnocentrism (Usunier and Lee 2013: 18–19). Introduced by Shimp and Sharma (1987), consumer ethnocentrism refers to consumers' positive bias towards products coming from their own country, culture, community or locale as opposed to foreign products (Bizumic 2019). Apparently, it is one of the most powerful drives against globalization, although the very fact that it is a globally recognized trend raises doubts about its anti-global nature. Its focus on localities also tends to relate well with another concept that looks particularly promising for future interdisciplinary directions in advertising translation research, this time borrowed from linguistics – translanguaging.

As laid out by García and Li Wei (2014: 3, emphasis in the original), translanguaging defines 'fluid practices that go *between* and *beyond* socially constructed language [...] systems, structures and practices to engage [...] multiple meaning-making systems and subjectivities'. In other words, the notion of translanguaging questions the identity between nationality and language, highlighting how in multilingual, multicultural environments individuals may freely pick elements from their full array of meaning-making resources, including all the named languages they have variously come in contact with (whether formally recognized or not) and non-verbal resources (Mazzaferro 2018: 5). The centre of the translanguaging perspective is the language user and his/her individual linguistic resources rather than the languages s/he uses. Translanguaging practices are increasingly observed, due to both an increase and diversification of migration flows, and the political or de facto acknowledgement of multilingualism in multiethnic or multinational states across the world. As a result, 'the relationship between language and the nation-state [is] being constantly reassessed' (Li Wei 2018: 15).

It would be interesting for future research, then, but also for future translation practice and teaching, to put the 'practical theory' of translanguaging (Li Wei 2018) to the test of promotional translation. Translanguaging practices may be purposefully used as a means to increase consumer identification within minority or multi-language communities, as aptly described by Mensah (2018). When the purpose to sell or promote becomes pressing, the promoter or advertiser might well resort to all resources at hand, whether professional or non-professional. Style or translation quality – as assessed against standard named language varieties – may then

become secondary concerns, if the final result is effective for marketing a product or promoting a lifestyle. The translanguaging perspective appears particularly promising when working with self-promotional texts meant for the social media, whose communication spaces are potentially more ‘intimate’ for both authors and intended audience and offer more room for a kind of communication that is less concerned with grammatical correctness than with effective customer identification (Torresi 2021).

Conclusion

We have seen in the previous section that there is significant room for interdisciplinary research that looks at advertising and promotional translation using concepts belonging to other fields such as international marketing or linguistics (in particular, through the lens of translanguaging). Conversely, translation studies could at least in part inform research into advertising and promotion that is rooted into other disciplinary traditions – for instance, social, cultural or gender studies. To mention but one example, Weinbaum et al. (2008) discuss translated ads as shapers of a globalized gender imagery in the ‘Modern Girl’ discourse that was popular in the interwar period (1919–1939) across the world, and still permeates women’s globalized self-image. This study, however, does not delve into the translation processes that led to the creation of a specific gender image. Of course it was quite legitimately out of the scope of Weinbaum et al.’s study to investigate advertising *translation* as a social practice, or to discuss advertising *translators’* ‘ethical and socio-political responsibilities [and thus] challeng[e] traditional perspectives on the translator’s role in society’ (Wolf 2010: 34). But the time may be ripe to take the ‘sociological turn’ or the ‘sociology of translation studies’ (Wolf 2007) a step forward, and actively seek social and cultural scholars’ collaboration to acknowledge that translation is an *agent* of sociological change and globalization at large (see Section ‘Advertising translation and cultural variation – an accelerator of globalization?’). While almost trite within translation studies circles, the not-so-marginal role of translation in general, and of advertising and promotional translation in particular, in shaping individual and collective values and role models appears to be rather neglected out of the boundaries of translation studies. Further interdisciplinary collaborative projects, then, might facilitate a ‘translational turn’ in other fields of research, such as – but not limited to – social or gender studies, similar to what appears to have already started within cultural studies (Bachmann-Medick 2014). After all, interdisciplinarity itself can be conceptualized ‘as a form of translation across differences’, and translation ‘as a metaphor for thinking about the challenges of researching across differences more generally – be they linguistic, disciplinary, or cultural differences’ (Bhambra and Holmwood 2011: 4). With its sharp intercultural focus, embedded in the very persuasive purpose of the texts it deals with (see Sections ‘Advertising translation and cultural variation – an accelerator of globalization?’ and ‘Critiques of advertising translation as an instrument of colonialism(s)’), the study of advertising and promotional translation promises to be a particularly fruitful area of translation studies for such interdisciplinary translational research.

Further reading

Morón, M. and Calvo E. (2018) ‘Introducing Transcreation Skills in Translator Training Contexts: A Situated Project-based Approach’, *Journal of Specialised Translation*, 29, pp. 126–148.

In addition to introducing the topic with a well-informed diachronic examination of the term and practice of transcreation, the paper illustrates in detail a professional training project in transcreation involving translation students and agencies. It thus offers useful input for advertising translation class design.

Risku, H., Pichler, T. and Wieser, V. (2017) 'Transcreation as a Translation Service: Process Requirements and Client Expectations', *Across Languages and Cultures*, 18(1), p. 53–77.

The paper presents the results of the authors' interviews with Austrian, German, Italian and Swiss clients of an Austrian translation agency regarding their expectations about the translation or transcreation of promotional materials. The presentation of the empirical study is complemented with an in-depth diachronic exploration of transcreation, both in the translation/copywriting market and in advertising translation studies. An interesting intersection between the standpoints of marketing practice and applied translation studies.

Valdés, C. (2016) 'Globalization and Localization in Advertising: A Love-Hate Relationship?', *Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos*, 22(2), pp. 130–153.

A very well informed and detailed account on how advertisers' international marketing choices impact translation choices. Real-life examples include instances of non-translation of the advertising copy complemented with mandatory legal statements in the local language, outlining how globalizing strategies can successfully coexist with specific local needs. Fraught with material and reflections on the 'pre-translation' of ads within marketing offices in order to make them more suitable for multiple consumer bases with different national identities, languages, social and cultural backgrounds.

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