

Introduction

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.49.01.int>

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The Moving Text: Localization, translation, and distribution

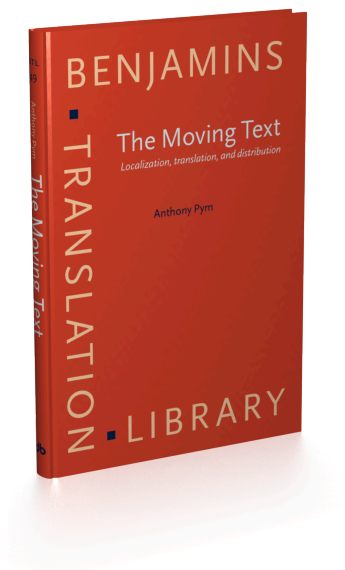
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[Benjamins Translation Library, 49] 2004. xviii, 223 pp.

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, “localization” has been the name commonly attached to the most successful language industries of our day, particularly in the areas of software, product documentation, and e-commerce. “Translation”, on the other hand, is associated with a cottage industry that would seem to have remained unchanged for centuries. Translation is often seen as a small part of localization, and localization is occasionally viewed as an elaborate form of translation. The two terms, however, name potentially antagonistic ways of approaching cross-cultural communication.

For most discourses on localization, translation was long a question of routine, “just a language problem”. For some translation theorists, discourses on localization introduce fancy terms but nothing essentially new. Both views are probably right, but only to an extent. As localization has blossomed into an industry conservatively valued at USD 3.7 to 5 billion a year (Fry 2003:6), the world of traditional translation is obliged to take notice, for economic reasons if nothing else. At the same time, recent years have seen the localization industry pay increasing attention to the importance of translation quality, the lack of which can cost considerable sums in its own right. This is reflected in the naming of a new composite sector bringing together “globalization, internationalization, localization, and translation”, under the acronym GILT (Fry 2003), perhaps to expiate the guilt of having believed it was all just localization.

This book will attempt to give meaning to those terms (admittedly somewhat less with respect to “globalization”), setting up a dialogue across their differences. Is there anything really new that translation practice and theory can learn from localization? Can localization theory in turn learn anything from the history and complexity of translation? Does internationalization concern localization but not translation? Is globalization the only wider process within which localization makes sense? To address those questions, we place both localization and translation within a conceptual frame more general than globalization, that of material distribution. Products and texts are distributed in time and space; localization and translation respond to those movements in different ways; their relative advantages might thus meet on some kind of common ground.

In setting up that dialogue we have not sought recipes for more efficient localization or predictions for the next wave of globalization. Nor have we presumed to touch the ineluctable future of translation theory. Ours is an unashamedly academic attempt to understand what is happening in cross-cultural communication. Working within the analytical tradition, we attempt to draw out the principles of what people say and do, without trying to teach, correct, or condemn. Most of the ideas people have about cross-cultural communication are probably idealist fantasies, yet that is no reason for not analyzing how those beliefs actually operate in social contexts. Our first aim here is not to prescribe, not especially to critique, not even to say what is eternally true, but to grasp the concepts that people are using. That in itself will hopefully constitute an intervention in the field, raising awareness and perhaps helping people to improve communication.

Much of this book is a reworking of *Translation and Text Transfer* (1992), which was itself based on an Honors dissertation defended in 1980. The return to that twice-tilled soil is partly justified by the obscurity of the previous fruits. A more vital justification, however, lies in the intellectual interest of replanting the ideas in a new millennium. As our locales change, so do the values of our texts. Back in 1980, translation theory was of interest as a way of making incipient Cultural Studies talk with Linguistics. In the early 1990s, our ideas were more focused on debates about national sovereignty in the cultural field. Now, in a more clearly globalizing age, the aim is to make analytical translation theory converse with the developing ideas about localization, in a way that might help overcome serious blind spots on both sides. This started as a naïve experiment, taking the old text and simply writing “localization” instead of “translation” on every occurrence. The resulting changes became extensive, not only quantitatively (four of the previous eight chapters might still be recognizable) but also ideologically. The reworking has led to relatively new categories such as “internationalization” (a misnomer we borrow from the localization industry) and “humanization” (our attempt to say what is missing in much technical discourse), as well as “distribution” in order to counter misunderstandings of our previous reliance on the term “transfer”. The production of this book thus mirrors part of its theme. We set out to localize a distanced text, the new and the old locales resisted the movement, wide-ranging transformations became necessary.

Our analytical approach requires a model of localization as a discursive act, as a mode of language production in itself. The first part of this book seeks such a model, bringing on board many of the categories specifically operative in the

domain of translation. Those categories remain useful, we believe, because they help temper some shortsighted debates about asymmetric directionalities (Chapter 2), the nature of equivalence (Chapter 3), the translator's relative anonymity (Chapter 4), and the quantities involved in translation (Chapter 5). That group of chapters more or less updates our position on several key issues in translation theory. It should also indicate the richness of translators' options. Some of the more technical and academic discussion will be of little immediate interest to readers concerned with localization, yet we include those chapters so as to indicate the extent of what translation can do.

Those ideas are then related to localization through an analysis of the costs incurred in the different modes of cross-cultural communication. This involves assessing why various forms of cultural belonging create resistance to distribution (Chapter 6) and how that resistance leads to variable transaction costs (Chapter 7). We then consider the ways the growing segmentation of the labor market for cross-cultural language workers might be countered by attention to historical and ethical modes of professionalization (Chapter 8). The book closes with an inductive attempt to assess the effects of localization technology on technical discourse, and how translation might ethically operate on such discourse (Chapter 9). That conclusion, we admit, is more critical than analytical. It is ultimately a search for the specific virtues of translation, over and above the efficiencies of localization.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, where he was Visiting Fellow at the time of completing this book. The manuscript was read by Eveline Coombe of the University of Auckland, Andrew Chesterman of the University of Helsinki, and José Ramón Biau Gil, of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, to all of whom we express our sincere thanks.

