Chapter 9

When Cultural Evolution Calls for Translation Revolution: Resistance and Rupture in Brazilian Translations

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ABSTRACT

Given the massive changes that Brazil has undergone in the past century, particularly in distancing itself linguistically from its former colonizer, this study is an attempt to determine the role of translation in the country’s cultural evolution. Translational approaches have developed along opposing poles: on the one hand, a strong resistance to incorporating orally-driven alterations in the written language, while on the other, a slow, halting movement toward convergence of the two, and both approaches are charged with political and ideological intentionality. Publishing houses, editors and translators are gatekeepers and agents whose activities provide a glimpse into the mechanism of national linguistic identity, either contributing to or resisting the myth of a homogenized Portuguese language.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
WB Yeats (The Second Coming, 1920)

INTRODUCTION

The amazingly rapid pace of cultural evolution in the globalized world calls for a much faster reinterpretation and redefinition of concepts and scenarios than what perhaps would have been considered necessary centuries or even decades ago. In order to understand more complex and ever-shifting realities, much more comprehensive views on cultural changes and exchanges must be attempted. And translation stud-
ies are emerging as an important tool for analyzing not only “the big picture,” but also the fine details of cultural evolution. Therefore, this chapter sets out to apply this tool from a descriptive perspective to a paradoxical context: Brazil, where rupture and resistance can be seen in a constant dialectical movement when translations are considered.

This text provides an initial overview of Brazilian translation culture in recent decades, considering the many actors and aspects involved in this current process of cultural evolution. To paraphrase Niranjana (1992, p. 1), in postcolonial contexts, such as the situation in which Brazil currently finds itself, translation serves as an effective lens for examining historical questions of representation and power. Given the extraordinary prevalence of translation in this country, the importance of associating Brazilian culture and translation is undeniable. Translation’s role here has been as a protagonist rather than a supporting actor with respect to cultural goods: according to Wyler (2003, p. 13), in 1987 80% of all books read in Brazil were translations. But this complex system and recent developments within it can only be understood if properly contextualized, both historically and linguistically.

The historical and linguistic contextualization proposed here is not as simple as it may seem at first sight. As a nation, Brazil is quite young: although claimed as a colony by the Portuguese Empire in 1500, it was proclaimed a United Kingdom with Portugal in 1818, granted nominal independence under Prince Pedro de Alcântara in 1822 and became a full republic only in 1889 (for further information on Brazil’s ambiguous and contradictory path to independence, see Gomes, 2010). Brazil is also the fifth largest country in the world both in area and in population, as well as the largest Lusophone nation (and the only one in the Americas). The impact and implications of such facts, both currently and historically, tend to be overlooked, even by language, literature and translation scholars. Thus, this chapter is a preliminary attempt to connect Brazilian history, language and culture with translation studies from the perspective of cultural and linguistic cohesion, language-determined relations of power and translated language as cultural capital, as well as to point out certain recent developments in translation practice which indicate that a revolution is underway. However, such a task must begin with a critical consideration of Brazil’s general background, deconstructing or problematizing myths of the Portuguese language.

BACKGROUND: THE LANGUAGE(S) OF BRAZIL

Brazil’s two official languages, Portuguese and Brazilian Sign Language, are accompanied by a number of minority languages still spoken in the country. According to the 2010 Census, 274 different indigenous languages are in use in Brazilian territory, mainly in the north (i.e. Amazonian) and midwest regions, even though many of these are at risk of extinction. Furthermore, there are significant bilingual communities, particularly in the south. Although most of these consist of German and Italian descendants, Japanese-, Dutch-, Arabic- and Spanish-speaking communities also exist. But this is not the full extent of the national linguistic panorama.

At the dawn of the colonial era in what would come to be called Brazil, approximately 1,200 indigenous languages were spoken (Rodrigues, 2005, p. 36). However, within a few years of the Portuguese arrival, a Tupi-based pidgin was being used throughout the country, becoming known as the língua geral (‘the general language’). Thus, Portuguese colonization did not automatically entail imposition of the Portuguese language or even its widespread use; its expansion within the vast territory was irregular, both in distribution and speed. Only in the 18th century was the colonizer’s language finally institutionalized by the government. The língua geral began to wane and virtually disappeared, as did many of the