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Adaptation

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Adaptation

The notion of adaptation has often been discussed, supported or severely criticized in the field of translation studies. But despite being frequently dismissed as an abusive form of translation, or not translation at all, adaptation is frequently listed among the possible valid solutions to various translational difficulties. Moreover, the idea that all translators engage in adaptation, consciously or otherwise, is implicit in the recognition that translations always undergo what Venuti calls a process of domestication.

Adaptation may be understood as a set of translative interventions which result in a text that is not generally accepted as a translation but is nevertheless recognized as representing a source text. As such, the term may embrace numerous other notions such as appropriation, domestication, imitation and rewriting. Strictly speaking, the concept of adaptation requires recognition of translation as non-adaptation; for this reason, the history of adaptation is parasitic on historical concepts of translation.

The initial divide between adaptation and translation dates back to Cicero and Horace, both of whom referred to the interpres (translator) as working word for word and distinguished this method from what they saw as freer but entirely legitimate alternatives. The different interpretations given to the Horatian verse Nec verbum verbo curabis reddere fidus interpres (and you will not render word for word [like a faithful translator]) – irrespective of whether they were for or against the word-for-word precept – effectively reveal the logic by which adaptations could be recognized.

The golden age of adaptation was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the epoch of the Belles infidèles, which started in France and then spread to the rest of the world. The very free translations carried out during this period were justified in terms of the need for foreign texts to be adapted to the tastes and habits of the target culture since those tastes and habits were considered superior. The nineteenth century witnessed a reaction to a freedom that was seen as infidelity, but adaptation continued to predominate in the theatre. In the twentieth century, the proliferation of technical, scientific and commercial documents has given rise to a preference for transparency in translation, with an emphasis on efficient communication; this could be seen as licensing a form of adaptation which involves rewriting a text for a new readership while maintaining some form of equivalence between source and target texts.

Many historians and scholars of translation continue to take a negative view of adaptation, dismissing the phenomenon as a distortion, falsification or censorship, but it is rare to find clear definitions of the terminology used in discussing this and other related controversial concepts.

Main definitions

Bastin (1998) offers a comprehensive definition of adaptation applied to texts used for teaching purposes and in handbooks, but the concept continues to be part of a fuzzy metalanguage used by translation studies scholars. Today, adaptation is considered only one type of intervention on the part of translators, with a distinction being drawn between deliberate
Adaptation interventions (Bastin 2007) and deviations from literality.

As one of a number of translation strategies, adaptation can be defined in a technical sense. The best-known definition is that of Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), who list adaptation as their seventh translation procedure. This definition views adaptation as a local rather than global strategy, employed to achieve an equivalence of situations wherever cultural mismatches are encountered.

Adaptation is sometimes regarded as a form of translation which is characteristic of particular genres, most notably drama. Indeed, it is in relation to drama translation that adaptation has been most frequently studied. Brisset (1986:10) views adaptation as a reterritorialization of the original work and an “annexation” in the name of the audience of the new version. Santoyo (1989:104) similarly defines adaptation as a means of naturalizing the play for a new milieu, the aim being to achieve the same effect that the work originally exercised, but with an audience from a different cultural background (Merino Álvarez 1992, 1994). Adaptation is also associated with advertising, audiovisual and inter-semiotic translation, and localization. The emphasis here is on preserving the character and function of the original text, in preference to preserving the form or even the semantic meaning, especially where acoustic and/or visual factors have to be taken into account. Other genres, such as children’s literature, also require the re-creation of the message according to the sociolinguistic needs of a different readership (Puurtinen 1995, Oittinen 2000; O’Sullivan 2005; Alvstad 2008a; Lathey 2015). The main features of this type of adaptation are the use of summarizing techniques, paraphrase and omission.

Adaptation is, perhaps, most easily justified when the original text is of a metalinguistic nature, that is, when the subject matter of the text is language itself. This is especially so with didactic works on language in general, or on specific languages. Newmark (1981) points out that in these cases the adaptation has to be based on the translator’s judgement about his or her readers’ knowledge. Coseriu (1977) argues that this kind of adaptation gives precedence to the function over the form, with a view to producing the same effect as the original text. However, while such writers start from the principle that nothing is untranslatable, others like Berman (1984) claim that the adaptation of metalanguage is an unnecessary form of exoticism.

Definitions of adaptation reflect widely varying views vis-à-vis the issue of remaining ‘faithful’ to the original text. Some argue that adaptation is necessary precisely in order to keep the message intact (at least on the global level), while others see it as a betrayal of the original author’s expression. For the former, the refusal to adapt confines the reader to an artificial world of foreignness; for the latter, adaptation is tantamount to the destruction and violation of the original text. Even those who recognize the need for adaptation in certain circumstances are obliged to admit that, if remaining faithful to the text is a sine qua non of translation, then there is a point at which adaptation ceases to be translation at all.

Another author who questions the systematic differentiation of adaptation and translation is Gambier (1992), who points out that there is an evident gap in defining the notion of adaptation, and in clarifying which line a translation has to cross to become an adaptation. Gambier notes that many translation procedures suggested by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), other than adaptation (such as omission and condensation), are adaptations nonetheless. He examines classic examples of translations that are commonly regarded as adaptations and concludes that the labelling of any text produced by a translator as an adaptation is often a hasty personal judgement that has little to do with reasoned analysis. Asking a translator to produce a text that favours the target audience at the same time as avoiding any kind of linguistic, semiotic or cultural adaptation is untenable. This is precisely the ambiguity of adaptation Gambier refers to in the title of his paper: ‘Adaptation: une ambiguïté à interroger’.

Modes, conditions and restrictions

By comparing adaptations with the texts on which they are based (Bastin 1993), it is possible to elaborate a selective list of the ways (or modes) in which adaptations are carried out, the motivations (or conditions) for the decision to
adapt, and the limitations (or restrictions) on the work of the adapter.

In terms of mode of adaptation, the procedures used by the adapter can be classified as follows: (a) transcription of the original: word-for-word reproduction of part of the text in the original language, usually accompanied by a literal translation; (b) omission: the elimination or implicitation of part of the text; (c) expansion: the addition or explicitation of source information, either in the main body or in a foreword, footnotes or a glossary; (d) exoticism: the substitution of stretches of slang, dialect, nonsense words, etc. in the original text by rough equivalents in the target language (sometimes marked by italics or underlining); (e) updating: the replacement of outdated or obscure information by modern equivalents; (f) situational or cultural adequacy: the re-creation of a context that is more familiar or culturally appropriate from the target reader’s perspective than the one used in the original; and (g) creation: a more global replacement of the original text with a text that preserves only the essential message/ideas/functions of the original.

The most common factors or conditions which cause translators to resort to adaptation are: (a) cross-code breakdown: where there are simply no lexical equivalents in the target language (especially common in the case of translating metalanguage); (b) situational or cultural inadequacy: where the context or views referred to in the original text do not exist or do not apply in the target culture; (c) genre switching: a change from one discourse type to another – for example, from adult to children’s literature – often entails a global re-creation of the original text; (d) disruption of the communication process: the emergence of a new epoch or approach or the need to address a different type of readership often requires modifications in style, content and/or presentation.

These conditions, which in practice may exist simultaneously, can lead to two major types of adaptation: local adaptation, motivated by problems arising from the original text itself and limited to certain parts of it (as in the first two conditions), and global adaptation, which is determined by factors outside the original text and involves a more wide-ranging revision. As a local procedure, adaptation may be applied to isolated parts of the text in order to deal with specific differences between the language or culture of the source text and that of the target text. In this case, the use of adaptation as a technique will have a limited effect on the text as a whole, provided the overall coherence of the source text is preserved. This type of adaptation is temporary and localized; it does not represent an all-embracing approach to the translation task. Local, or as Farghal (1993:257) calls it, “intrinsic” adaptation is essentially a translation procedure which is guided by principles of effectiveness and efficiency and seeks to achieve a balance between what is to be transformed and highlighted and what is to be left unchanged. Except in the case of local replacement of metalanguage, local adaptation is generally not mentioned in the target text in a foreword or translator’s note. As a global procedure, on the other hand, adaptation is applied to the text as a whole. The decision to carry out global adaptation may be taken by the translator or by external agents such as a publisher, as part of an editorial policy. In either case, global adaptation constitutes a general strategy which aims to reconstruct the purpose, function or impact of the source text. The intervention of the translator is systematic, and formal elements and even semantic meaning may be sacrificed in order to reproduce the function of the original.

As in the case of translation, adaptation is carried out under certain restrictions. These include the knowledge and expectations of the target reader: the adapter has to evaluate the extent to which the content of the source text constitutes new or shared information for the potential audience; the target language: the adapter must find an appropriate match in the target language for the discourse type of the source text and look for coherence of adapting modes; and the meaning and purpose(s) of the source and target texts.

**Theoretical boundaries between adaptation and translation**

Some scholars prefer not to use the term adaptation at all, believing that the concept of translation as such can be stretched to cover all types of transformation or intervention as long as “the target effect corresponds to the intended target text functions” (Nord 1997:93), whether or
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not these functions are the same as those of
the source text. Others view the two concepts as rep-
resenting essentially different practices. Michel
Garneau, Quebec poet and translator, coined the
term tradaptation to express the close relation-
ship between the two activities (Delisle 1986).
The few scholars who have attempted a serious
analysis of the phenomenon of adaptation and
its relation to translation insist on the tenuous
nature of the borderline which separates the two
concepts.

The study of adaptation encourages the the-
orist to look beyond purely linguistic issues and
helps shed light on the role of the translator as
mediator, as a creative participant in a process of
verbal communication. Relevance, rather than
accuracy, becomes the key word, and this entails
a careful analysis of the meaning and purpose
of the text. Translation – or what is traditionally
understood by the term translation – prioritizes
the transmission of meaning, whereas adap-
tation seeks to fulfill the purpose of the source
text, and exegesis attempts to spell out the inten-
tions of the author. Adaptation may constitute
deliberate intervention on the part of the trans-
lator, but for functional purposes. Most deliber-
ate interventions like appropriation, imitation
and manipulation imply a shift in authorship
(Vandal-Sirois and Bastin 2012). This kind of
analysis will inevitably lead translation studies
to consider the inferential communication pat-
tern (Sperber and Wilson 1986), rather than the
traditional code model, as the most appropriate
frame of reference for the discipline.

It is imperative to acknowledge adaptation as
a type of creative process which seeks to restore
the balance of communication that is often dis-
rupted by traditional forms of translation. Only
by treating it as a legitimate strategy can we
begin to understand the motivation for using it
and to appreciate the relationship between it and
other forms of conventional translation.

Translation studies and
adaptation studies

Since adaptation studies is currently thriving as a
discipline in its own right (Raw 2012 2013; Cat-
trysse 2014), it is important to explore the main
points of contact with translation studies, espe-
cially since practices such as the novelization
of a movie, and the rendering of a poem into a
song or the toning down of a certain narrative
for younger readers are of interest to both disci-
plines and resonate with some of the debates in
translation studies (Milton 2009).

Sanders’s Adaptation and Appropriation (2006)
may be considered a classic in the young disci-
pline of adaptation studies, alongside the break-
through works of Stam and Raengo (2007),
Leitch (2007), Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2006),
Cattrysse (2014), Raw (2012) and Cartmell
(2012). While Sanders seldom talks of transla-
tion as such, her definition of adaptation as an
“attempt to make text ‘relevant’ or easily com-
prehensible to new audiences and readerships
via the processes of proximation and updating”
(2006:19) can be easily applied to translation
as commonly understood. In the glossary of
the same book, she defines adaptation as “an
updating or the cultural relocation of a text to
bring it into greater proximity to the cultural
and temporal context of readers or audiences”
(ibid.:163), a definition which rehearses the
motivation for translators to abandon a more
literal approach in order to preserve the mean-
ing, effect or purpose of the original text while
ensuring the best reception possible amongst
the target audience.

For Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2006), the term
adaptation simultaneously refers to (a) the entity
or product which results from transposing a par-
ticular source, (b) the process through which the
entity or product was created (including reinter-
pretation and re-creation of the source), and
(c) the process of reception, through which “we
experience adaptations as palimpsests through
our memory of other works that resonate
through repetition and variation” (Hutcheon
and O’Flynn 2006:8–9). The goal of adaptation
is not simply one of replication; other motiva-
tions include interrogation, reinvention and
exploration. Intertextuality is a central element
of adaptation theory, as developed by Hutcheon
and O’Flynn and others, given that the reader is
assumed to compare the adapted text not only
with the original but also with other adaptations
and similar texts in an ongoing dialogical pro-
cess (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2006:21). Adapta-
tions, according to Hutcheon and O’Flynn, are
not of inferior status compared to the original;
indeed, they guarantee its durability and sur-
vival.
For Cattrysse, the basic similarities between translation and adaptation include the fact that both offer artefacts, both are irreversible and teleological and both draw upon the notion of equivalence (2014:47–49). Cattrysse rejects the faithful/unfaithful opposition which merely reflects the tastes and power dynamics in a given period of time and a given system (ibid.:244–245). He adopts a multilateral and intertextual approach to the issue of faithfulness, taking into account a “constellation” of adaptable factors (ibid:306–307).

Translators who oppose the domesticating approach do not necessarily adopt word-for-word translations, but can still consider adaptation key to a successful translation. This view is compatible with the clear distinction that Sanders draws between adaptation and appropriation: “Adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original. . . . Appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” (2006:26).

See also:
ADVERTISING; CHILDREN’S LITERATURE; COMICS, MANGA AND GRAPHIC NOVELS; GREEK AND LATIN TEXTS; LITERARY TRANSLATION; LOCALIZATION; REWRITING; STRATEGIES; THEATRE

Further reading

Advocates for a new discipline drawing on Toury’s descriptive translation studies and Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory.


Reflects on the question of the parallels, common grounds, differences and boundaries between the disciplines, and discusses issues of originality and transmediality, the problematic relationship between source and target, as well as conservation and gradual change.


Defines adaptation as a product and a process that aims to achieve intertextual coherence between the target audience and the source text, and demonstrates that the act of adaptation always involves both (re)interpretation and (re)creation.


Explores multiple definitions and practices of adaptation and appropriation and the impact of various theoretical movements, including structuralism, post-structuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, feminism and gender studies.

GEORGES L. BASTIN

Advertising

Advertising texts have been widely studied from the linguistic and sociological points of view, and are among the favoured objects of semiotic analysis, from Barthes and Eco to later developments in visual and social semiotics. In translation studies, however, advertising translation has only attracted systematic attention since the turn of the century (Guidère 2000a; Bueno García 2000; Adab and Valdés 2004; Torresi 2010). Until then, promotional materials – including subgenres such as advertising, publicity and tourist brochures – were mainly used in general translation handbooks as examples or special cases of commercial translation (Olohan 2009, 2010) or consumer-oriented translation (Washbourne 2010; Hervey et al. 1995/2006) that are best approached from a functionalist perspective.

A possible reason for the reticence of early translation scholars to address the question of translating advertising material may lie in the verbal (written and oral) connotations traditionally attached to the term translation, which may explain why the crosslinguistic and cross-cultural transfer of multimodal promotional texts is often termed localization (Declercq 2011), adaptation or – less frequently – transcreation or rewriting. The latter set of terms suggest a type of transfer which is less concerned with issues of faithfulness and more with functional equivalence and adequacy. In this context, non-translation becomes acceptable as a delib-