

## Translation Equivalence in the Bilingual Society (Second Edition, published by RIUSS)

Leticia Molinero © 2016  
Translated by Maria Cornelio

### Abstract

Addressing the concept of translation equivalence refers us to the debate between formalist (prescriptivist) and functionalist translation theorists. The past three decades have witnessed the rise of radical changes in the concept of translation equivalence. While linguists and translation theorists were discussing and forging the *skopos* theory and favoring functionalist translation strategies, empirical translators in the United States faced a linguistic reality wherein bilingualism, cultural convergence and government requirements forced us to see the need to transcend the frontiers of the general Hispanic norm. In this article we present a first approximation to the evolution of the translation experience in the bilingual society, while also showing the need for specific research on the communicative reality in written Spanish in the United States.

### The bilingual society

The United States is a multicultural and plurilingual country, and within the context of the Hispanic presence it is *de facto*, if not fully *de jure*, a bilingual society, as various linguists and language scholars have observed. This bilingualism includes several levels of ability with respect to linguistic expression, in one or the other language, or both, in the same way as in groups of monolingual persons.

In a recent article about the teaching of Spanish to students who enroll in college courses of Spanish for heritage speakers in the United States, linguists Robert Blake and Cecilia Colombi identify two types of bilinguals: those who have recently arrived in the country and six types of bilinguals who, in our opinion, can be characterized as *hispanounidenses*<sup>1</sup> because they were born or have lived in the country for many years. This classification includes a series of characterizations that range from higher to lower command of academic Spanish and English to a very low level of command of both languages. Typically, recently-arrived students who have a good academic background in a monolingual country are characterized as “speakers of a prestigious variety of Spanish.”<sup>2</sup> Three classes of bilinguals can be identified who have “good academic abilities in English” while their command of Spanish progressively decreases. Finally, there are two types of bilinguals with “few academic abilities in English” and who “have not developed academic abilities in Spanish.” They “can use a variety of rural Spanish with many limitations,” however, or “can understand a variety of rural Spanish contact with limitations.” (Blake-Colombi, pp. 293-294). The “variety of Spanish contact” means that the use of Spanish reflects contact with English.

To this characterization of college students we can add the observations of María Cornelio who teaches translation at Hunter College, City University of New York. She states that many *hispanounidenses* who enroll in college courses in the United States don't always understand

---

<sup>1</sup> Neologism derived from the traditional “estadounidense” (someone who lives or was born in the United States, regardless of ethnic heritage). “Hispanounidense” refers specifically to those of Hispanic heritage who live or were born in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> The translation of this and all other quotations used in this article is ours.

word definitions in the *Diccionario de la lengua española* of the Spanish Royal Academy (DLE).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, in his survey on bilingualism in the state of New Mexico<sup>ii</sup> (the only state with Spanish and English as official languages and one of the few in which bilingual education is the policy), linguist and journalist Fernando Martín Pescador poses the question of identity directly to respondents. He believes that the designation of bilingualism in the U.S. Census does not fully represent the reality, since that specific question seeks to determine if the person speaks another language at home, without taking into account the fact that there are multilingual individuals who speak only one language at home and are thus erroneously disqualified as bilinguals.

A new concept of bilingualism that reveals itself among these respondents is that they consider that “Spanish is a language of the land” and this is more important in their self-identity as bilinguals than whether they actually speak Spanish. In fact, many English-speaking monolinguals of Spanish heritage who have lost their ability to communicate in Spanish nevertheless consider themselves bilinguals:

“[two of those surveyed] make it clear that being bilingual for them goes beyond the linguistic concept of being fluent in two languages. They link being bilingual to their own identity, to their roots, to their family, to their memories. Both speak of origins. Of genesis. As if the language used during the creation of a culture were tied to that culture and its inhabitants until the end of their days. Race, identity, language, land, are all united in the myth of origins. If the language is lost, so one loses one’s identity, memories, origins, and land.” (Pescador, 12-13)

Another interesting observation of this study is applying the term bilingual to all those who have some knowledge of the other language, even if they are not fluent. Although the survey registers small percentages of people who are monolingual in Spanish and other native languages, its author states that an elementary recognition of English among Spanish-speaking monolinguals is enough to characterize them as bilinguals.

In summary, the bilingual *hispanounidense* society presents a population of readers of the Spanish language who pose great challenges for translators in terms of reading comprehension. That is, academic or standard Spanish, addressed by the academic precept which charges the academies of the language with prescribing the Spanish norm in accordance with the level of educated speakers in a country, presents a dilemma in terms of establishing levels of reading comprehension, which would be the required condition for translations that target limited-English-proficiency and low-literacy audiences.

### **Translation in the bilingual society**

Those of us who reside and translate in the United States are generally professionals from Spanish-speaking, mostly monolingual countries. Thirty years ago, many of these translators had not studied translation in a university or done coursework in theoretical translation studies. Rather, we were professionals from other disciplines (lawyers, architects, educators, writers, engineers, physicians, teachers of various subjects) who chose translation as our main line of work in this country. The characteristic shared by this group of translators is that we arrived in this country well-versed in the educated Hispanic norm.

---

<sup>3</sup> María Cornelio 2014, oral communication, 7<sup>th</sup> April.

The experience of translation places us face-to-face with the linguistic and cultural convergence lived through by the *hispanounidense* population while at the same time being conscious of the need to affirm the Hispanic norm to maintain the unity and communicative competence of a universal language. This challenge arises in terms of recognizing what makes communicative sense even at the expense of the general normative prescriptions of the language. Given the diversity of origins of Spanish speakers, generational differences and contact with the hegemonic language which functions as the global *lingua franca*, it is to be expected that the use of Spanish in the United States will acquire certain distinctive characteristics.

Initially and naturally, each translator responds to the text from the perspective of the general Hispanic norm. However, the *hispanounidense* experience provides translators on the one hand with data on lack of comprehension on the part of the reader (terms such as *conllevar, efectuar, elucubrar, gestionar, involucrar, para con, reunir o satisfacer las condiciones, siniestrar, suministrar, transar, transigir*), and on the other, translation market requirements. These entail calques, borrowings, and assimilations (*calificar para, ser elegible para, copago, proveer, hospicio, corte* instead of *tribunal, referido* or *referimiento* instead of *derivación, referencia, legal* instead of *jurídico, crimen* instead of *delito, estatuto de limitaciones* instead of *derecho o plazo de prescripción*).

This translation experience, although not well studied or documented yet, is registered anecdotally through a series of interactions that are part of the translation process. These include:

- The request that the translation be specifically for “U.S. Spanish”
- Lack of reader comprehension as reported to the translator by the intermediary who requests the translation
- Translation reviews (corrections) received by the translator from his/her direct clients’ internal reviewers who, in the best of cases, have direct contact with the readers and provide this level of readership feedback
- Translation reviews (corrections) received by the translator from his/her direct clients’ internal reviewers who are bilingual but not translators and who do not understand the registers of the translated text
- Government requirements for use of “plain language” comprehensible to readers at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level (a guideline for English-speakers that has not been set specifically for Spanish-speakers in the U.S.)
- The Federal Government’s *CLAS: Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services*, which is a requirement for all healthcare-related information

On the basis of these concrete constraints the translator begins to modify his/her response which diverges from the educated Hispanic norm in order to adapt his/her work to a series of requirements whose goal is to reach the reading public.

The common characteristic of these constraints is ultimately in accord with the federal government decision to use language that would allow for the communication of information to the largest number of speakers, be it in English (*plain language*) or in immigrant languages (*lenguaje llano* or *claro* for Spanish).

## Specifics of Translation of Information and Communication

Unlike literary translation, which encompasses cultural complexities and cultivated linguistic registers written for educated readers, informative and communicative translation is driven mainly by the functional goal that we have called “operative functionality”<sup>4</sup> (translations adapted to a reading-comprehension environment that empowers the reader to function in a given context) and its major focus is a hypothetical reading comprehension in order to guarantee an effective communicative act. We translators assume that readers have a passive knowledge of language which allows them to recognize texts that lie outside their usual repertoire. In this manner, translators become an active player in the bilingual society by enlarging the lexical-semantic capacity of the Hispanic norm according to the assumed reading comprehension of the majority of the *hispanounidense* population.

Laura Godfrey, director of GobiernoUSA.gov and corresponding member of the North American Academy of the Spanish Language (ANLE per its Spanish acronym), presents a classic example of operative functionality: a translator may translate “Federal Citizen Information Center” as “Centro Federal de Información para el Ciudadano.” The translation is linguistically correct but the message excludes immigrants who are not American citizens in the sense used by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The translation that correctly applies the principle of operative functionality is “Centro Federal de Información para el Público.”

In this way, through translators’ experience—that particular “know-how” that cannot be categorized as easily as current automation and systematization projects would like it to be—translators become the acting party in the bilingual community they simultaneously interact with and condition (normalize and prescribe the norm). A translator who chooses a functionalist strategy proposes terms that transcend the limits of the general Hispanic norm, while maintaining the norm in syntactic, orthographic and grammatical expressions. That is, he/she operates within the boundaries of the language.

The reality of our translation experience finds an echo in today’s translation presentations that question prescriptivist theories. Amalia Rodríguez Monroy proposes “a theory of translation that urgently needs to align itself with a discourse theory aimed at facing the challenges of meaning. And the challenge lies, in our view, in a theoretical approach to the problems posed by the cultural text: a possible starting point which requires, nevertheless, **crossing the frontiers of the text, in order to get closer to what is real in the discourse and to what is real in the translation experience** (bolding is ours). The path, as the father of translation knew only too well, is not straight. It requires its detours, since passing through what is real ends up referring us to another text: the text of our experience.”<sup>iii</sup>

## Linguistic contact and cultural convergence

In linguistics we find a specific focus that contributes to the understanding of the translation process in the *hispanounidense* society. In his brilliant article on conceptual convergence in U.S. Spanish, Ricardo Otheguy<sup>iv</sup> analyzes the influence of U.S. English on the discourse of *hispanounidenses*. But first he takes the precaution of clarifying the classic division between language and speech: “the distinction between *language and speech* must be kept in mind (...) otherwise, it is impossible to frame in a coherent manner any question of a linguistic nature, among them the presence of systematic English features in the Spanish of the United States.” (Otheguy, p. 130).

---

<sup>4</sup> *El español de los Estados Unidos, un nuevo punto de partida*, Molinero, p. 12

He clearly explains that one cannot speak of an influence on language in the case of anglicizing discourse, that is, language use: "(...) to answer the question of the influence of English over Spanish, what we must decide, on a case by case basis, is if what is behind *the culturally Americanized discourse* that one frequently hears in the United States, is a *structurally anglicized* language. They are two different questions, and a large part of the prevailing confusion, and of the insistent reference to mixture and Spanglish, is due to confusing one thing with the other." (Otheguy, p.132). In the speech phenomena where one can detect the presence of "discursive contents" of American English, Otheguy recognizes a spontaneous "translation" act.

When those contents are also registered in written Spanish, the phenomenon of "conceptual convergence" described by Otheguy in our opinion generally has the character of *intentionality*.

"When language and the culture that govern conceptualization are not synchronized, we frequently find this adaptation through conceptual convergence, using the language of a community but carrying out the references, describing the scene, through the conceptual contents of the other." (Otheguy, p. 139). He provides an example in the case of a Spanish journalist who, in writing "*Secretario de Estado*, does so resorting to concepts formulated in a different manner because they belong to another culture (that of the United States), and **resolves this cross between language and culture by practicing conceptual convergence** (bolding is ours). The same thing happens to the *New York Times* writer, but in reverse. He is writing in English *President of the Central Bank*, but he does so about concepts belonging to a culture not that of the United States, and he decides to adapt himself to the conceptualizations of that other culture." (Otheguy, p. 138).

In the first case, the equivalent of the target culture would be *Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores*, and in the second case it would be *Chairman of the Federal Reserve*. In other words, "what the journalist has done is to import content elements of American culture (its conceptualization of the job description), not structural lexical elements of the English language. The cross between language and culture is resolved, in all these cases, through discursive-cultural adaptation, without cognitive-linguistic adaptation." (Otheguy, p. 140). This is a case of "foreignization," using the terminology of Venuti<sup>5</sup>, who also separates himself from the traditional or "domesticating" theory of translation equivalence. It is very interesting to observe this incidence outside the bilingual society, obviously due to the impact of English in the globalized broader Spanish-speaking national cultures.

Another aspect of this influence and cross between language and culture consists of recognizing the "cohesioning element" of lexical borrowings of English origin that are shared by all *hispanounidenses*, which thus confirms our observation that English has a positive influence for the Spanish of the United States.<sup>5</sup> Otheguy also verifies the reality of the convergence of speakers from different national origins in such far-flung points of the United States as Houston and New York City, as revealed by studies on dialectical leveling. Such congruencies and leveling are also registered in written Spanish, in large part a product of translation, especially in nationally-distributed texts such as the Spanish-language websites of the federal government and those of all types of business.

---

<sup>5</sup> El inglés es un factor unificador del español [en EE. UU.]. *Hacia la norma lingüística del español de los Estados Unidos*, L. Molinero, Glosas, Volumen 7, Número 3, ANLE, p. 11

Otheguy, furthermore, provides an important characterization of the *hispanounidense* bilingual community. He points out that in the case of Spanish speakers in the United States, "the conceptual convergence we observe between, say, *day care center* and *centro de cuidado diurno*, or between *life in prison* and *vida en prisión*, does not encompass two different social or geographical contexts, or even two different people, but rather **takes place, in its early stages, within the mind of the same bilingual (from where it is later disseminated to the rest of the community), who belongs simultaneously to two communities.**" (bolding is ours). This situation of the bilingual society is not at all transferable to that of any monolingual country, and is what explains the idiosyncrasy in the use of language and **the leadership role of the translator** and the communicator who write in Spanish in this country.

### **Factors that condition the exceptions to the general Hispanic norm**

The professional translator, and in many cases the journalist, does not go to the extremes of conceptual convergence in speech that, as recognized by Otheguy himself, ends up sounding like a "bad translation" to the ears of Spanish speakers of monolingual countries, but he/she does make decisions regarding lexical innovations that can broadly be differentiated in three areas of transformation or deviation from the general norm, as illustrated by examples taken from translations for the US public health system, one of the biggest consumers of translation:

- 1) cognates (previously "false cognates") that spread systematically and become part of the spontaneous vocabulary of bilinguals exposed to the terminology of public health institutions, such as *admitir* instead of *ingresar al hospital*, *condición* instead of *enfermedad* or *afección*, *referimiento/referido* instead of *derivación*, *remisión* or *recomendación*, *elegible* instead of a periphrasis such as *que reúne las condiciones para*, etc.
- 2) words that require new meanings due to their specific connotations and functionality within the public health system, such as *hospicio*, *cuidado primario/proveedor de atención de salud primaria*, *dieta balanceada* instead of *equilibrada*
- 3) words or expressions that replace others so as to avoid social costs perceived as negative, such as *persona con sobrepeso* to avoid *persona gorda*, *labio hendido* to avoid *labio leporino*, *persona con diabetes* to avoid *diabético*

In all these cases there is an awareness in the translator's consciousness of what may be called "the gravitational weight" of American English in 1) and the social engineering of American culture in 2) and 3) above. This controlled advance of conceptual convergence in written discourse has such communicative power that even in the valued and respected work tool, Fernando Navarro's *Diccionario crítico de dudas inglés-español de medicina*, we find in many entries notes such as this: "For those who grant primacy to the criterion of frequency of use, it may be interesting to know that, due to the pressure of English, the use of 'admisión' in the sense of 'ingreso' (especially in the expression "Servicio de Admisión") is, in practice, already so widespread in our hospitals that few reviewers would feel justified in correcting it in a text for publication." As we can see, "the pressure of English" transcends not only texts but also borders, so that *estadounidismos* are not always exclusive to the United States, even if they originate in translations from American English.

### **The notion of translation equivalence – Translation strategies: functionalism vs. formalism**

The traditional and current notion of translation equivalence consists of making the translation sound as natural as if it were a text written originally in the target language. This acquires

differential nuances when the “target language” is not characterized by the homogeneity it has in any monolingual country, but rather by the heterogeneity of its speakers’ diverse origins, and by the constant reference to the English of the predominant culture in the bilingual society.

As we have seen, in some cases, the reference to English is the best option for resolving the lexical-semantic differences of this population. It is not only a matter of finding a word close to the English-language referent, but of expressing the correspondence with the national referent, independently of the term’s linguistic equivalence in other countries. A simple example is the translation of “agency” in the context of government entities, versus the variety of meanings in other countries: *dependencia, entidad, institución, organismo, repartición*. ANLE recognizes the *estadounidismo* “*agencia*” which has been used as a calque of English for many years and already is part of the normal *hispanounidense* vocabulary.

Many translation scholars recognize “the relative and flexible nature of translation equivalence” (Albir, 2001-2004, p. 223)<sup>vi</sup> which reflects the functionalist approaches that run counter “to the notion of traditional equivalence, of a prescriptive and linguistic character” (Albir, 2001-2004, p. 223). This writer recognizes the translator’s responsibility in working with a text in function of its specific communicative capacity and considers that “when there are changes in function due to the goal of the translation, there is also translation equivalence;” in other words, the translator may adapt the text in order to guarantee its “operative functionality” (Molinero, p. 12). **This is the functionalist translation strategy.**

In the past thirty years there has been a change of viewpoint in favor of translation’s cultural turn as opposed to the traditional formal, prescriptive approaches. In these debates between formalists and functionalists we are particularly interested in the turn “towards inductive approaches as manifested in the increasing use of linguistic typology in the last decades” (De lingüística, p. 16). The functionalism-formalism debate is resolved “[...] in field work, in obtaining the empirical data that will allow the affirmation or refutation of what would otherwise remain anchored in the terrain of theoretical or meta-theoretical reflection about language” (De lingüística, p. 16). This in the last analysis reaffirms the classic position of all the Academies of the Language: the people own the language. In the same manner, Molinero’s proposal in *El español de los Estados Unidos, un nuevo punto de partida* is framed within these inductive approaches. Based on empirical information, it points out that “translation sets the norm and the backbone of the Spanish of the United States.”

The reality of language contact, conceptual convergence, and the need for operative functionality of the bilingual society, all define a lexical-semantic typology characteristic of written U.S. Spanish. Nevertheless, this typology does not characterize the entire use of the language, but rather coexists with the linguistic norm of general Spanish which is commonly used in the entire country. The mission of the North American Academy of the Spanish Language (ANLE) is, therefore, to recognize these distinctive forms of the lexical-cultural experience, of transculturation, and of the traditions of written Spanish already rooted in this culture.

“The vision of the world of the speakers,” which some translation scholars, such as Humberto Eco and Juan de Dios Luque Durán (De lingüística<sup>vii</sup>) believe is quite difficult, if not impossible to transfer, acquires a special character in the United States. Here the target language operates functionally in the same cultural environment as the source language. Also, as we have seen, the bilingual person belongs simultaneously to two communities which have their point of contact in conceptual convergence, this being a powerful, singular circumstance that is non-transferable to the rest of the Spanish-speaking countries. **The notion of conceptual**

## **convergence demands the modification of the traditional concept of translation equivalence.**

Many translators still allow themselves to be guided more by the Dictionary of the Spanish Language than by knowledge of the actual linguistic environment. It is easier to translate from the prescriptive general norm than to move forward over terrain that is plagued with uncertainties. Many translators, in fact, fall into the trap of exaggerating their precautions in rejecting words that by now are considered correct translations, such as “versus” in the sense of *contra*, “americano” in the sense of *estadounidense*, “alfabetizar” in the sense of *ordenar alfabéticamente*, “asumir” in the sense of “dar por supuesto,” and many others. Clearly, it is important to consult the dictionary, since it is constantly updated.

### ***Estadounidismos***

Currently, the North American Academy of the Spanish Language registers and recognizes *estadounidismos*<sup>6</sup>, words that express the new reality of the use of the language in this country, something that will have a fundamental impact on translation equivalence in the United States. The translation into Spanish of information related to health, which is an integral part of every government public-health program, presents an excellent example of the generation of *estadounidismos*. It is interesting to analyze this process to the extent that it reveals deliberate decisions by translators who know perfectly well the alternatives presented by general Spanish in the dictionaries and reference works that compile established usage in Spanish-speaking countries. These *estadounidismos* are found in sources that are respected due to their good level of Spanish and public responsibility such as Medicare, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Medline Plus (part of the network of the National Institutes of Health (NIH)), and a large number of businesses and government agencies representing broad geographical distribution at the national level. Often the *estadounidismos* are used in the same text together with traditional words, such as “enfermedad” and “condición” (as translation of “condition” in the sense of illness or health problem, rather than its traditional Spanish meaning of “state of being”), which shows the transitional phase in which the *hispanounidense* vocabulary currently finds itself.

### **Conclusions**

While the federal government’s proposal for plain language communication is important to guarantee the greatest possible reach of information, translators grapple with many questions that can be answered only through disciplined and interdisciplinary studies.

Current plain-language directives for the English-speaking population are based on studies of reading comprehension at the national level. These have identified the lexical and syntactic limits that make possible the best fit between the message and its intended audience. In contrast to this situation, no such formal studies have been done to date among Spanish speakers/readers. However, we do have a few guideposts to point the way: the work done by some linguists on bilingual reading ability and the anecdotal experiences of translators. We should build upon them to determine the most effective way of communicating with the average *hispanounidense*.

In 2014 the federal government communicated to ANLE the need for a collaborative project focused on plain language. We have seen that the experience of translation and written

---

<sup>6</sup> Word or use characteristic of spoken Spanish in the United States of America. (DRAE)

communication raises the issue of reading comprehension, which ultimately is a key factor in determining a plain-language vocabulary. Research on the issue of reading comprehension will allow translators and other communicators to find the style and vocabulary to achieve effective communication. This study is particularly important in a population that originates in different Spanish-speaking countries, whose educational level in Spanish is not homogeneous and often limited, and whose use of language in this country is modified by constant contact with English.

The challenge of the plain-language project is now being met by the creation of The Research Institute of United States Spanish, Inc. (RIUSS). RIUSS has set out a comprehensive corpus-based program that includes registering *estadounidismos* and documenting the principles of functional communication in concert with government agencies and the private sector, and the fundamental issue of reading comprehension in key areas of information and communication.

We are confident that the results of these future studies will serve as a reference, not only so that translators may find new translation equivalents, but also in the areas of the teaching of Spanish and of translation in the United States.

## Bibliography

---

<sup>i</sup> Blake, Robert & Colombi, Cecilia (2013) "La enseñanza del español para hispanohablantes: un programa universitario". *El español en los Estados Unidos: E Pluribus Unum? Enfoques multidisciplinares*, ANLE, Nueva York.

<sup>ii</sup> Fernando Martín Pescador (2010): *Nuevo México como sociedad bilingüe; Resultados de las encuestas sobre bilingüismo realizadas en Nuevo México*

<sup>iii</sup> Rodríguez Monroy, Amalia (2000). *El saber del traductor: hacia una ética de la traducción*, Montesinos, Barcelona, 200

<sup>iv</sup> Otheguy, Ricardo (2013): "Convergencia conceptual y la sobreestimación de la presencia de elementos estructurales ingleses en el español estadounidense", *El español en los Estados Unidos: E Pluribus Unum? Enfoques multidisciplinares*, ANLE, Nueva York

<sup>v</sup> Venuti, Lawrence (2008). *The Translator's Invisibility – A History of Translation*; Routledge, London and New York, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed.

<sup>vi</sup> Hurtado Albir, Amparo. (2001-2004) *Traducción y Traductología – Introducción a la traductología*; Cátedra, Madrid.

<sup>vii</sup> Pamies Bertán, Antonio (ed.). *De lingüística, traducción y léxico-fraseología – Homenaje a Juan de Dios Luque Durán*. Comares, Granada, 2013.