Translating Buddhist Terminology: Ethnocentrism, Multiculturalism and Interculturalism

Nicole Martínez-Melis

Abstract

The translation of Buddhist terminology has had to be rethought in the light of the practice of Buddhism in the West as a living tradition. This new area of research has already made a contribution to translation studies. In this article, the TRAFIL research group (Translating remote philosophies to facilitate understanding) in the Departament de Traducció i d'Interpretació de l'Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona presents the results of some preliminary studies aimed at building a multilingual terminology data bank (MarpaTerm) designed as an aid to translating Tibetan Buddhist texts into Spanish and Catalan.

Buddhism is currently on the increase in the West, far from its native soil (Midal 2006; Gira 1989), leading to significantly more translations of texts about this spiritual tradition. This opens up a field of research within Translation Studies: the problem of the translation of terminology. Given that Buddhism cannot be understood through traditional dichotomies such as 'philosophy' versus 'religion', 'faith' versus 'reason', or 'theism' versus 'atheism', it propels us into conceptual frameworks different from all those to which we are accustomed.

A Terminology Database

In this context, we are now presenting the preliminary work on developing the MarpaTerm database,[1] which is intended to begin a standardisation process for Buddhist terminology in Spanish and Catalan, particularly as regards the Tibetan tradition. The goal is to allow effective communication that preserves the authenticity of

Buddhism in the target culture.

In the MarpaTerm database, Tibetan is the source language and Spanish and Catalan are the target languages, since no bilingual dictionary covers these language combinations. Our work is prescriptive, and seeks to put forward a rationalised terminology for Tibetan Buddhism in Spanish and Catalan. It is also descriptive, in that it indicates synonyms gathered from publications in Spanish and Catalan, as well as the most widely used terms in French and English,[2] and the Sanskrit term when available. In some lexicographical works, each entry is associated with one *term* and describes all the meanings associated with it, but in this database each record is associated with a single *concept*, and there can be different records for one term since it could refer to different concepts. A record consists of:

1) the term(s) in Tibetan associated with a specific concept – in the Tibetan alphabet and in Wylie transliteration[3] – along with a simplified phonetic transcription and a lexical translation;
2) the term(s) in Spanish[4] accompanied by a definition and optionally a note, and in some cases a definition in context along with its source, the hypernym, the hyponyms, the related terms, the translation technique that was applied, and a usage note;
3) the term(s) in Catalan, French, English and Sanskrit – in Romanised transliteration, accompanied by a lexical translation. Sanskrit[5] has been included for three reasons. First, most of the Tibetan terminology was originally translated from Sanskrit. Second, the Buddhist terms most commonly used in the West are loans from Sanskrit. Finally, Sanskrit sometimes provides a translation solution, in that it does not always express the concept in the same way as Tibetan.

Translation Methodology Options

Buddhism has influenced numerous cultures throughout its history, and its expansion, and thus its translation, has not impeded the continuity of values, which have remained intact despite the cultural diversity with which it has been in contact (Aguilar 1997). This is why we believe the best way to facilitate transmission and understanding of Buddhism in the West is, on the one hand, to bear in mind its adaptability, and, on the other, to apply concepts from social and cultural anthropology to the translation of its terminology, avoiding any ethnocentrism or multiculturalism and instead using a transcultural approach, as explained below.

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to interpret the world and other cultures from a unique viewpoint, made up of the observer's ideas and value judgements (Beltrán 2005). This prejudiced attitude, which involves over-valuing one's own culture – seen as superior to all others – and therefore a negation of the other culture, does not allow for cultural interchange. In translating this terminology, the ethnocentric tendency shows itself in a methodological option that we call assimilation,[6] which consists of appropriating an original concept and erasing its specific qualities by applying a target-language term that refers to a different concept. Examples of this option, which is typical of the oldest translations, can be found in the *Dictionnaire thibétain - latin – français*, prepared by the French Catholic mission in Tibet in the 19th century. The French missionaries translate *sdig pa*, which means 'that which degrades', as '*peccatum, culpa, vitium*; *péché, faute, vice* [sin, fault, vice], without considering the philosophical and religious system to which this term belongs. Ethnocentrism is also present in the first Western translation of the famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, from 1927, in which Evans-Wentz uses terminology from Christianity and the writings of the Theosophical Society (Prats 1996), which, along with other late 19th-century esoteric movements, tried to appropriate Buddhism. Against all expectations this tendency still exists today, and can be found even in the terminology normally used by Western

Buddhists. For example, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the meanings of 'blessing' is 'God's favour and protection'; yet this is used to translate *byin rlab* (Sanskrit, *adhiṣṭāna*), which clearly refers to a different concept, as explained by the Dalai Lama (2003):

> Blessing must arise from within your own mind. It is not something that comes from outside […]. The Tibetan word for blessing can be broken into two parts – *byin* means 'magnificent potential,' and *rlab* means 'to transform.' So *byin rlab* means transforming into magnificent potential.

The same is the case for *smon lam* (Sanskrit, *praṇidhāna*), which is usually translated as 'prayer', even though it is 'not a request to an external deity, but a method of purifying and directing the mind' (Fremantle andTrungpa 1976).

As for multiculturalism, we use it here in the sense of recognising the existence of cultural diversity associated with a certain tendency to maintain the separateness of cultures (Beltrán 2005). In other words, differences are acknowledged but remain clearly delimited, such that once again cultural interchange is impossible. In translation, multiculturalism is revealed in a methodological option that we call differentiation,[7] which involves making excessive use of loan words with their original spelling, and of calques. In other words, it involves using these two techniques in situations where they are not essential. For example, the translator does not translate the term when an equivalent exists in the target language, or, if there is no equivalent, translates literally, ignoring the constraints of the target language. This approach, which emphasises exoticism, is generally used in academic works and does not facilitate understanding of the original concepts: it keeps them in another culture, as if there were an insurmountable gap between the cultures. Let us consider three examples of loan terms from Sanskrit, in wide use among specialists, that we have taken from a published thesis (Pezzali 1968). In some cases, the term *bodhi* is not translated

and the author treats it as a feminine noun in French, as in the original language.[8] Indeed, she speaks of 'la *bodhi*', even though a masculine form would be more appropriate since the word refers to 'Awakening,' which is a masculine noun in French. She also does not translate the term *śūnyatā* ('la manière d'être des choses (*tathatā*) est la *śūnyatā*', p. 119), though the corresponding word in French is 'vacuité' ('emptiness'). The author does not translate the *dharma* either, leaving the term in Sanskrit without applying a plural ending ('La perfection du savoir est l'essence de tous les *dharma*', p. 147), even though it can be translated into French as 'phénomènes' ('phenomena') in this context, which refers to exactly the same concept. In this last example, the decision to use a loan word – which is unnecessary since there is an equivalent in the target language – and the omission of the plural ending can only cause confusion, given that the term *dharma* has multiple meanings in the context of Buddhism.[9]

Interculturalism is characterised by exchanges and communication between cultures: an interchange with no hierarchy and no desire to dominate. This is a dynamic that allows the emergence of transculturalism.[10] The goal of the transcultural approach is to go beyond cultural concerns and seek balance through universal understanding, and, in a way, to create new cultural realities (Mancini 1999). In translating terminology, this approach comes about through a methodological option that we call transculturation,[11] i.e. a rational give-and-take between concepts and terms in the two languages/cultures in contact, allowing decisions on a case-by-case basis about which translation technique – from equivalence to loan terms – is most appropriate. The point is to strike a balance in order to convey a message that contains the essence of the original, and create something new, in our case Buddhism in two Romance languages: Spanish and Catalan.

Thus, neither the methodological option of *appropriation*, used mainly by the earliest translators – who might not have known the subject well enough – nor the methodological option of

differentiation, traditionally used in academic research – which is usually restricted to scholarly knowledge – is useful when translating Buddhism as a living spiritual tradition. Only a methodological option of *transculturation* can rise to the challenge and integrate terminology into the target language/culture without appropriating or excluding key concepts. The solution is to do a reasoned translation*,* since we start by defining the concept, and only after this consider the techniques described below and choose the one that in this case, and only this case, lets us effectively render the concept.

Translation Techniques

If the concept exists in the target language/culture, we use, in order of preference, the following techniques:

a) *equivalence:* a translation that covers the full meaning of the original concept. There are, in fact, concepts in Buddhism that already exist in our language/culture. For example, the Spanish term *transitoriedad* is fully equivalent to the key concept of 'impermanence', expressed in Tibetan as *mi rtag pa* (Sanskrit, *anitya*).
b) *contextual equivalence:* a term in the target language that refers to a concept that does not fully cover the Buddhist concept described by the Tibetan term. This technique involves enriching the target language/culture. For example, *mente* (mind) for *sems* (Sanskrit, *citta*), *conciencia* (consciousness) for *rnam par shes pa* (Sanskrit, *vijñāna*),
If the concept does not exist in the target language/culture, we use, in order of preference, the following techniques:
a) *creation:* creating a new term for the target language/culture. This is an essential technique, as it helps to bring the reader closer to understanding the new concept than a calque or loan term would. Buddhism, for instance, defines three types of suffering. The first type of suffering refers to what we usually understand as suffering: all sorts of physical or mental pain. The second is suffering caused by the transitory nature of phenomena. The third type is the suffering

that characterises all forms of conditioned existence. To avoid confusion with the other two types of suffering, we opted to translate the first type (*sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal*, in Sanskrit, *du kha du khatā*), ordinary suffering, as *sufrimiento por el dolor* (suffering due to pain) rather than *sufrimiento del dolor* (suffering of suffering), the traditional calque, which struck us as not very illuminating, not only because of the repetition of the word 'suffering', but also because of the grammatical construction, which in Spanish might seem to suggest that the suffering itself is suffering. Another example: in translating the key concept referred to as *ma rig pa* (Sanskrit, *avidyā*), if we start with the definition, i.e., 'falta de conocimiento de la realidad tal como es que mantiene a los seres atrapados en la existencia cíclica' ('unawareness of reality as it actually is, which keeps beings trapped in a cyclical existence'), it becomes clear that the traditionally used word, 'ignorancia' ('ignorance'), which the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* defines as 'Falta de ciencia, de letras y noticias, general o particular' ('Lack of knowledge, of arts or news, general or particular'), does not refer to the same concept. We therefore propose the newly coined term *desconocimiento fundamental* (fundamental unawareness).

b) *calque:* a literal lexical translation from the Tibetan or Sanskrit. Examples of calques from Sanskrit include the translation of *bodhi* (Tibetan, *byang chub*) as *Despertar* (Awakening) and *vipari ṇāma du khatā* (Tibetan, *gyur ba'i sdug bsngal*) as *sufrimiento por el cambio* (suffering due to change). It is important here to stress the difference between a calque, which is a technique used when the concept does not exist, and a contextual equivalent, a technique used when the concept already exists. For example, the term 'suffering' is a contextual equivalent since it refers to a broader concept, but at the same time it sometimes refers to the concept of suffering as we generally understand it. By contrast, 'suffering due to change' is a completely new concept. Finally, regarding calques, one of our goals is to rethink the calques from English that are traditionally used in Spanish texts dealing with Buddhism, which are actually barbarisms.

c) *loan terms*: this does not involve translating the Sanskrit term but rather generally adapting it to the target language's system. Indeed,

Sanskrit is traditionally the source language for the loan. Thus *buddha* becomes 'buda' to adapt it to the rules of the Spanish language, and it appears in that form in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*. In the same vein, we propose 'bodisatva' as an equivalent for *bodhisattva*. In this matter we follow Martínez de Sousa[12] (2001: 129), who says that the loan can be either integrated, in other words fully adapted to the language's phonological and spelling system, or transplanted, in cases where a form not fully compliant with the target language's phonological and spelling system becomes entrenched through usage, as with the term 'dharma'. Thus, we decided to accept integrated or transplanted loan terms that are already entrenched by usage, while choosing to integrate new loans when they are needed from now on.

In fact, the problem consists entirely of defining the concept correctly in order to determine whether we are dealing with a concept that already exists or one that is new. If the concept exists, we must precisely assess the degree of correspondence between the Buddhist concept and the concept in our language/culture. If the concept is new, we should favour creation and avoid the calques that have been employed too often under a pretext of faithfulness, as this type of lexical faithfulness betrays ignorance of the translation axiom that one should translate meaning rather than words, and messages rather than languages. On the other hand, existing loan terms should be examined to decide whether they should be retained, with an eye towards avoiding excessive exoticism. If the loan is essential, it should be adapted to the phonological and spelling system of Spanish. Since our goal is, again, to integrate Dharma into our language/culture, we subscribe to the words of Francisco Varela (2000):

> Part of my life has been spent repeating the Dharma in our languages, reformulating it in accordance with our models of thought, with an approach of radical innovation. It is, in fact, respect for tradition itself that inspired this enthusiasm for the project. It is still a risky endeavour. We must begin a process of reinvention whereby people will re-experience that which is central and unique within Dharma.

Conclusion

Our preliminary work in developing a database about Tibetan Buddhism has yielded 1) a methodological option for translation that can move beyond the dichotomy of privileging either the target language/culture or the source language/culture, 2) the development of translation criteria and techniques that should allow true integration of the terminology.

What is unusual about our research is that, because we were not satisfied with the numerous terms put forth by available Spanish glossaries, which were based on English terms, we insisted on working not only from terms in the original source language, Tibetan, but above all from the concept. We are guided by the definition and by the word's context. We are aware that this subject matter is foreign to our categories of thought. We must accept this, in order to free up our thinking and keep our ears open to new categories. As Wallace (2003: 5)[13] writes about Buddhism and science:

> To understand Buddhism on its own terms, it is imperative that we in the West recognize the cultural specificity of our own terms *religion*, *philosophy*, and *science* and not assume from the outset that Buddhism will somehow naturally conform to our linguistic categories and ideological assumptions.

Notes
1. The MarpaTerm database is a project of the TRAFIL research group (Translating remote philosophies to facilitate understanding), attached to the Department of Translation and Interpretation at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.

2. This is because French and English are the two Western languages from which the Spanish and Catalan translations are made, since direct translations from Tibetan are still extremely rare.

3. The most widely used system for transliterating Tibetan, proposed by Turrell Wylie in 1959.

4. The proposed term, which may be either our own translation or a translation already in use, is marked with the tag 'MarpaTerm proposal'.

5. Using the Romanised transcription established in 1894 by the 10th International Congress of Orientalists.

6. This methodological option corresponds to what Venuti (1995) calls *domesticating*.

7. The methodological option of differentiation has something in common with what Venuti (1995) calls 'foreignizing', in that both emphasise differences. It should be noted, however, that the third methodological option we propose takes our discussion beyond the traditional dichotomy that Venuti reflects.

8. For example: 'il porte son attention ferme sur la *bodhi*', p. 69 ; 'il accomplit le chemin gnoséologique pour parvenir à la *bodhi*', p. 127.

9. In our work, we intend to use the loan word 'dharma' only when it means Buddhist doctrine, and to translate the other meanings according to context.

10. The concept of transculturation first appeared in 1940 in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* by Fernando Ortiz.

11. As previously noted, with this third methodological option our approach goes beyond the traditional dichotomy in translation, which involves either reducing the original cultural elements to the reader's culture, or transporting the reader into the source culture.

12. Martinez de Sousa is a leading specialist in the Spanish language, particularly in spelling, typography and lexicography.

13. Quoted in Payne, 2002: 2.

Works Cited

Aguilar, O. 1997. 'La expresión de lo Absoluto en las diferentes culturas budistas : literatura o experiencia ?' In *Actes del II Congrés Internacional sobre Traducció*, ed. M. Barcardi. Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Beltrán, J. 2005. *La interculturalitat*. Barcelona: UOC.

Dalaï Lama, bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho. 2003. *Stages of Meditation.* New York: Snow Lion Publications. *Dictionnaire thibétain-latin-français*. 1986 [1899]. Montignac: Association des Hautes Études en Tibétologie.

Evans-Wentz, W.Y., trans. 1954 [1927]. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fremantle, F. and Chogyam Trongpa, trans. 1976. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.* Shambala Publications. With a commentary by the translators.

Gira, D. 1989. *Comprendre le bouddhisme*. Paris: Bayard/Centurion.

Mancini, U. 1999. 'Multiculturalidad, Interculturalidad, Transculturalidad: Conceptos y Estrategias', *1º Congreso Internacional de Cultura y Desarrollo* (La Habana), <http://www.crim.unam.mx/Cultura/ponencias/1CultDesa/CDIDE15.htm>.

Martínez de Sousa, J. 2001 [2000]. *Manual de estilo de la lengua española*. Barcelona: Trea.

Midal, F. 2006. *Quel bouddhisme pour l'Occident ?* Paris: Seuil.

Ortiz, F. 1963 [1940]. *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar*. La Habana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura.

Payne, R.K. 2002. 'Buddhism and Cognitive Science: Contributions to an Enlarged Discourse', *The Pacific World Journal*, 3/4, 1-13.

Pezzali, A. 1968. *Śāntideva. Mystique bouddhiste des VIIe et VIIIe siècles*. Firenze: Vallechi.

Prats, R. trans. 1996. *El libro de los muertos tibetano: la liberación por audición durante el estado intermedio*. Madrid: Siruela.

Varela, F. 2000. 'Une partie de ma vie s'est passée à redire le Dharma dans nos langues'. European Buddhist Union congress, 18 November 2000, UNESCO (report by Sofia Stril-Rever).

Venuti, L. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation.* London/New York: Routledge.

Wallace, B. A. 2003. 'Introduction: Buddhism and Science'. In *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, ed. B.A. Wallace. New York: Columbia University Press, 9-10.