# Culture and translation studies

## In brief

**POR** *Cultura* **SPA** *Cultura*

### origins

Of multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from French. Partly a borrowing from Latin. **Etymons:** French *culture*; Latin *cultūra*. […] French *culture* shows a learned borrowing from Latin, the regular development of the Latin word being shown by Old French, Middle French *couture* 'cultivated land' (12th cent.) ("culture, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020).

### abstract

The relevance of notions of ‘culture’ for any sustained discussion of translation has been amply confirmed in the entanglements that the two concepts have entered, repeatedly, in the intellectual environment of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Such entanglements have proved central to the rise of Translation Studies (TS) to its current disciplinary prominence, and have arguably been favoured by an element that discussions of ‘culture’ and ‘translation’ have long held in common: an ambitious conceptual scope, a tendency to extend (indefinitely, it sometimes seems) the terms’ semantic range. Such ambitions have a rich lineage, and have fostered key elements within our range of inquiry.

Indeed, culture is construed in this entry as the way of life of a community considered, synchronically and/or diachronically, in the fullness of its material and non-material conditions. This includes the rapport between language and experience, and its impact on the delineation of distinctive mindsets, patterns of behaviour, intellectual achievements and material achievements.

This very broad use of the concept of culture can be traced to arguments developed over the past century. The work of anthropologists (e.g. Ruth Benedict) in the period between the two world wars yielded the most influential definition of culture in our age, as ‘a whole way of life.’ Such contributions foreshadowed key developments in the disciplinary landscape of the late twentieth century that encompass the rise of ‘cultural studies’ (following the seminal work of authors like Raymond Williams), and the pervasive influence of those French thinkers of the 1960s and ‘70s

(Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva) who enacted the transition from structuralism to poststructuralism. A key notion prompted by such developments is that, rather than residing in essence or inherence, meaning is relationally constituted – or (in Stuart Hall's phrasing) it arises from a process of 'articulation.'

This entry delineates the intellectual consequences of such discourses on culture for the disciplinary fashioning of TS. The approaches covered range from polysystem theory to the 'cultural turn' and insights from postcolonial theory; and from thence to more recent developments such as the emphasis on 'multimodality' and arguments for the inception of 'post-translation studies'.

## record

Rui Carvalho Homem

2022

Homem, Rui Carvalho. 2022. "Culture" @ *ENTI (Encyclopedia of translation & interpreting)*. AIETI.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6480925

https://www.aieti.eu/enti/culture_ENG/

# Entry

**POR** *Cultura* **SPA** *Cultura*

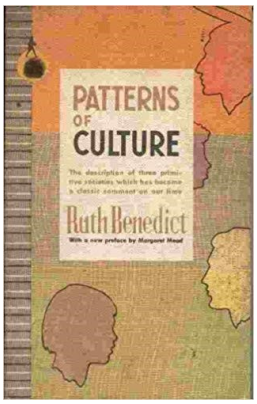
contents

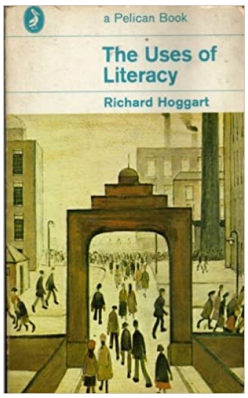
Introduction - On culture: influential 20th-century arguments | Culturalism and Translation Studies | The ‘cultural turn’ – and beyond | Coda: totality, diversity | Research potential

## Introduction - On culture: influential 20th-century arguments

Attempts to define culture have long resorted to claims of totality, inflected in their implications by changes in social and intellectual history. Such inflections provide an adequate gauge of the values and concerns that have informed the history of the past century. The work of anthropologists in the first half of the 20th century (and especially in the period between the two world wars) yielded the most influential definition of culture in our age, that which sees it as coterminous with ‘a whole way of life.’ In its referential breadth, the phrase – designed to occlude and replace the narrower (but nonetheless lingering) sense of culture as the epitome of human achievement in thought, writing and the arts – arguably carries a belated echo of the Terentian dictum, ‘nothing human [is] alien to me’ (which had resonated so strongly in the humanist tradition). In contributions from scholars such as Ruth Benedict (e.g. *Patterns of Culture*, 1934), this all-encompassing anthropological interest in the human expanded the western experiential and imaginative awareness by focusing on non-European cultures, their riches and complexities, and grounded the ethical assessment of cultural diversity on relativist arguments. Such developments occurred, it should be noted, a few decades before a concern with cultural and linguistic diversity, combined with denunciations of Eurocentrism, became mainstream in academic discourses and protocols of inquiry. Embraced by a few groundbreaking early- to mid-twentieth-century cultural anthropologists, the ambition to glimpse the structured, unique wholeness of a human community through a sharp focus on some of its components characteristically resorted to organicist tropes, images of integration and coherence – which proved an integral part of the attractions of their arguments (e.g., Benedict 1934: 45-7 and *passim*).

Conceptually and discursively, such contributions had a distinctive impact on critical discussions of ‘culture’ from a variety of intellectual and ideological post-World-War-II backgrounds. In general terms, these discussions foreshadowed key developments in the disciplinary landscape of the late twentieth century. T.S. Eliot’s *Notes*




*A milestone in the attempt to go beyond the western cultures.*

*A defence of education focusing on the central role of language as regards identity.*

*Towards the Definition of Culture* (written as a series of articles during the war, collected and published in book form in 1948) explicitly borrowed the 'whole way of life' description from anthropological sources, but balanced vehement pleas for preserving the 'level' of the individual and group, of elites and traditional institutions, against the communal sense of a shared pattern of experience (Eliot 1948: 21-4, 120-1, *passim*). These traits of Eliot's vision, combined with his understanding of culture as the outcome of 'organic' development rather than human deliberateness, came to be seen by many as epitomising the reaction of the traditionalist intellectual to the panorama of political and socio-economic change – which included, of course, the unstoppable encroachments of mass culture – that characterised the postwar world. However, if the 'whole way of life' definition could be enlisted by Eliot for fighting a rearguard action on behalf of a world under erosion, it would even more evidently suit the intellectual and ideological prospects of those who cherished the 'tomorrows that sing' of 'progressive' political programmes, and saw in the world of the 1950s the conditions also for an analysis of past and present that could buttress expectations of a reconfigured future. For scholars such as Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*, 1957) and Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society 1780-1950*, 1958; *The Long Revolution*, 1961), education, with an inevitably strong emphasis on the central role of language as regards identity, was a key element in such expectations. Their analysis also involved high appreciation of the traditions of popular (working-class) culture, and a marked wariness of the technological and commercial allure of mass culture. Williams's contributions, prominently including his distinction in 'The Analysis of Culture' between the 'ideal', the 'documentary' and the 'social' approaches to culture (Williams 1961: 57ff) – the latter obtaining most of his attention – are duly credited with playing a foundational role as regards the discipline of cultural studies, indeed a major development in the intellectual and academic history of the final quarter of the twentieth century.

back to top

## ¶ Culturalism and translation studies

The broader consequence of Williams's (1958, 1961) seminal work towards the rise of cultural studies was to be predicated, however, on the convergence of his culturalism with the influence of French thinking of the 1960s and '70s. This involved, crucially for the purposes of this entry, an assimilation of the notion that meaning arises from process rather than residing in essence or inherence; in other words, that it is relationally constituted. Such perceptions were central to the legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure's work, developed earlier in the century but given additional conceptual substantiation by the authors (in particular Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault) who, by breaking the mould of determinacy and of the logic of the closed system, enacted the transition from structuralism to poststructuralism. For the intellectual consolidation of cultural

studies, a decisive notion was indeed that artefacts, texts and practices do not have meaning inscribed in them from the outset (and for good), but rather derive it from a process of 'articulation' (as Stuart Hall influentially phrased it – cit. Storey 1994: ix). Cumulatively, Foucault's concern with the nexus knowledge-power, and its manifold manifestations within distinct discursive formations, provided an angle on semantic and representational processes that converged with the founding political matrix of cultural studies – and proved no less operative as regards the 'cultural turn' that so decisively assisted the disciplinary development of TS through the 1980s into the '90s.

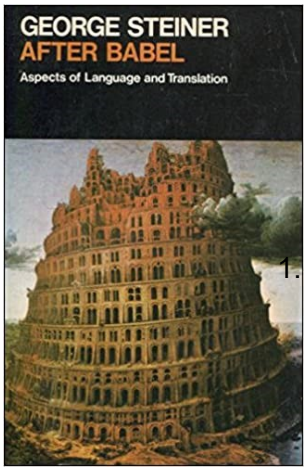
Indeed, a significant part of the rationale behind the rise of TS involved a focus on power that either borrowed from or paralleled the emergence of analytical and conceptual models – with the Foucauldian analysis as a key example – that became landmarks for discussing the operation of culture in the closing decades of the twentieth century:

1. A case in point is provided by the affinities between polysystem theory and the centre-periphery model. When Itamar Even-Zohar argued the productivity of studying 'translated literature' within a 'polysystem' defined by eminently changeable power relations involving 'central' and 'peripheral' literatures ([1990] 2012), his immediate conceptual enablement might derive (as claimed) from literary criticism – the Russian formalists, in particular. However, he was also drawing on a broader nexus (e.g. world-systems theory, epitomised by Immanuel Wallerstein's studies on geopolitics and geoculture - 1991) that in the relevant period saw its application extended from discourses on politics and economics to other dimensions in the study of culture.
2. Likewise, the favour enjoyed in recent years by arguments designed to rescue translation from its traditional minor status as secondary writing (its derivative nature at odds with the 'metaphysics of origin') owed much to the postmodernist questioning of the literary canon. Challenging the canon amounted to exposing the hierarchies and valuations of any gallery of great authors and great works (all of them 'original') as no more than a reflection of historically determined power dynamics. However, the counter-canonical strand in recent critical history was itself a particular manifestation of the broader anti-establishment ethics and politics that so momentously marked the western experience since the 1960s and 70s, gradually promoting an acknowledgement of cultural diversity and respect for minority cultures into central discursive positions (Guillory 1993, Gorak 2013).
3. A third example of ethical and political positions that have enjoyed a significant resonance within discourses on culture, and additionally contributed to the growth and consolidation of TS, involves the critique, launched from the field of comparative studies, of a literary history arranged into national literatures. The persuasiveness of this critique, and the corresponding rise to favour (and disciplinary centrality) of comparative literature, arguably reflected the wariness of nationality that marked the politics of western democracies since the middle of the twentieth century. Crucially for our purposes, such critique favoured a recognition of the role of translation as a matrix for writing that straddles the borders of languages and cultures – and hence as a domain in which history is always 'transnational' (Cronin 2006: 23).

back to top

## ¶ The 'cultural turn' - and beyond

As was pointedly the case in discussions of culture, pronouncements on translation have often claimed an all-encompassing conceptual range for their object – even when offered from intellectual standpoints otherwise defined by their wariness of totalising designs. A case in point is George Steiner's argument, in *After Babel* (1975), that 'translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in *every* act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the wider semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchanges. To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate' (1975: xii). Other examples, from markedly diverse backgrounds, include Octavio Paz's dictum, 'when we learn to speak, we are learning to translate' (1971 cit. Schulte and Biguenet 1992: 52), and the Irish critic Robert Welch's belief that 'all legitimate intellectual inquiry is translation of one kind or another' (1993: xi). This tendency to propose indefinite extensions of the concept of translation (with an ambition that inevitably carries the risk of a loss of heuristic and operative value) has been particularly in evidence whenever translation and culture are explicitly approximated or equated, as was regularly the case in contributions that partook or followed in the wake of the 'cultural turn' in TS. A decisive stage in this process was *The Manipulation of Literature* (1985), the landmark collection edited by Theo Hermans urging the view that translation is one of the tools for cultural 'manipulation' in society, a decisive means through which social institutions intervene in the construction of an envisaged 'culture'. In his foreword to *Constructing Cultures*, a later and largely congenial collection, Edwin Gentzler (1998: ix) could declare, with the confidence of a summation, 'the study of translation *is* the study of cultural interaction'. Gentzler's confident claim was made with the benefit of hindsight on an argument that by the late 1990s had run its critical course, and was accompanied by a recognition of the key role played by the collection's editors, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, in the 'cultural turn'. It vindicated an equation of translation and culture, on the relational understanding (an important premiss of cultural studies) that culture is precisely defined by interactions, indeed comprising all the dynamics of exchange proper to human experience.




The range of the cultural dynamics or 'interactions' that have been explored in contributions to the disciplinary construction of TS is as broad and diverse as it could be, in the sense that it includes all the major currents and causes that have energised the humanities and social studies in recent decades. Prominent strands in the culturalist imbrications of TS have included:

1. 1. the brand of hermeneutics and criticism represented by scholars such as George Steiner, who influentially argued the culturally revealing role of translation, its power to 'light up' the contours of national and transnational literary histories, gauged from the way in which (through translation) different cultures process the literary past (Steiner 1992, 1993);
2. 2. gender studies, through approximations between the power nexus that are, respectively, proper to

   (a) originals (authoritative, empowered) vs. translations (derivative, subaltern); and

   (b) gender-determined positions, male vs. female.

   As phrased by Lori Chamberlain (1988: 254) in her study of 'Gender and the metaphorics of translation', 'the opposition between productive and

reproductive work organizes the way a culture values work';

*A prominent example of the hermeneutic perspective in TS*

3. colonial / post-colonial concerns. Translation has been invoked, both as practice and concept, in studies of the relations between coloniser and colonised – but also, redemptively and with particular impact, as an inspiring model for postcolonial cultural conformations. For Maria Tymoczko, 'post-colonial writing might be imaged as a form of translation (...), a metaphor of transportation across (physical, cultural or linguistic) space or boundaries' (Tymoczko in Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 19-20); and for Homi Bhabha, in a much-quoted passage from *The Location of Culture*, 'it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (...) by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the other of our selves' (Bhabha 1994: 38-9).

back to top

## ¶ Coda: totality, diversity

The outline offered above will have shed some light on the reasons for the recent attractiveness of translation – again, both as practice and concept – within the disciplinary landscape of the humanities and social sciences. More specifically, it will have contributed to a justification of the recurrent claim that TS is an 'interdiscipline', and for the central, mediatory role played in this process by notions of culture. The ability that TS has shown to assimilate arguments derived from broader debates on culture has also been a contributing factor to the discipline's eclecticism, its capacity to draw on a flexible variety of intellectual models; this accommodation of diversity in its enabling arguments can in fact be seen as compensating for the hubris of the totalising claims cited above (cf. Gentzler 1998: xiii).

An extension of translation's remit through plurality and diversity can be seen at a medial level, with renewed arguments for the operativity of conceptual models from translation, beyond the verbal medium, in exploring intersemiosis and 'multimodality' (Pârlog 2019; Boria, Carreres, Noriega-Sánchez *et al*. 2020). And such non-hierarchical claims on different media converge with pleas for the discipline to move into 'post-translation studies', a disciplinary redefinition justified by the perception that 'in this new global age, (…) we all live in (…) translational cultures', within which 'indigenous and immigrant struggles with adaptation, assimilation, and resistance [can be] viewed not as the exception, but as *central* to cultural production' (Gentzler 2017: xii, 8).

Such recent developments, however, largely build on conceptual breakthroughs that gave a decisive shape to TS by the middle of the 1990s, and this will be acknowledged by bringing this entry on Culture to a close precisely with an echo of a contribution from that period. The contribution in question shows a senior scholar, Wolfgang Iser (otherwise known for his epoch-making work on reader-response criticism), drawn by his own intellectual trajectory, as much as by developments in his disciplinary range, to extend his focus from other domains of inquiry to a reflection on translation and culture. For Iser, in translation,

> **the specific nature of the culture encountered can be grasped only when projected onto what is familiar.** [...] **a foreign culture is not simply subsumed under one's own frame of reference; instead, the very frame is subjected to alterations in order to accommodate what does not fit.**

**(Iser 1995: 30)**

Iser stresses, in particular, that 'such changes [i.e. those that result from the cultural interface highlighted by translation] run counter to the idea of one culture being superior to another, and hence translatability emerges as a counter-concept to cultural hegemony' (Iser 1995: 30). His reflection reveals a productive critical assimilation of insights from anthropology, as also from other strands in the broad range of approaches synoptically described above: the poststructuralist concern with power dynamics; a willingness to extend the focus from the verbal to the social text; a foregrounding of the ethics and politics of difference; the perception that, by highlighting the inevitable coexistence of cultures ('our multiple dependencies' – Cronin and Ó Cuilleanáin 2003: 231), translation works against the essentialising pull of discourses on identity. Crucially for our purposes, Iser's contribution thus offers an epitome and fitting demonstration of the tightly knit rapport of translation and culture, pervaded by a combination of intellectual and ethical aspiration, in the discursive environments of late modernity.

back to top

## Research potential

As noted above, developments in TS, unfolding along the various strands that have fashioned the discipline, have fundamentally overlapped with the intellectual fortunes of notions of culture. The research potential, for TS, of the concerns that inform this 'Culture' entry is therefore vast and pervasive. This is in fact suggested in the closing section above – 'Coda: totality, diversity' – which is itself forward-looking, by outlining approaches that, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, show particular ambition and promise, and (crucially) draw on broad-ranging conceptualisations of culture. One of these approaches involves intersemiosis and 'multimodality': it concerns the range of possibilities that arise from conceptual extensions of translation into non-verbal media, consolidating arguments for the centrality of those nexus to the expressive cultures of our age. Another avenue of research opportunities that actively involve notions of translation and culture is opened up by claims that TS, as a discipline, is ready to undergo a dilution – but one that promises expansion rather than effacement. Indeed, 'post-translation studies' may be the name for a moment in its epistemic development that will witness a broad acknowledgement that our cultures are translational, the interlingual practice proving the ultimate matrix for all forms of cultural production as, inevitably, forms of exchange (sources sustaining these notions in the reference section).

back to top

# References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Steven Seidman (eds.). 1990. *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [+info]

* Bassnett, Susan & André Lefevere. 1998. *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. [+info]

Bassnett, Susan & Harish Trivedi (eds.). 1999. *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge. [+info]

Benedict, Ruth. 1934. *Patterns of Culture*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. [+info]

* Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. [+info]

Boria, Monica; Ángeles Carreres, María Noriega Sánchez and Marcus Tomalin (eds.). 2020. *Translation and Multimodality: Beyond Words*. London and New York: Routledge. [+info]

Chamberlain, Lori. 1988. “Gender and the metaphorics of translation” @ Venuti, Lawrence (ed.) 2012. *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, 254-268. London: Routledge. [+info]

Cronin, Michael & Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin (eds.) 2003. *The Languages of Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press. [+info]

Cronin, Michael. 2006. *Translation and Identity*. London: Routledge. [+info]

During, Simon (ed.). 2007. *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd edition. London: Routledge. [+info]

Eliot, T. S. 1948. *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber. [+info]

Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1990. “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem” @ Venuti, Lawrence (ed.) 2012. *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, 162-167. New York: Routledge. [+info]

* Gentzler, Edwin. 2017. *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*. London: Routledge. [+info]

Gorak, Jan. 2013. *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*. London: Bloomsbury. [+info]

Guillory, John. 1993. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press. [+info]

Hermans, Theo (ed.). 1985. *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*. London: Croom Helm. [+info]

Hoggart, Richard. 1957. *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*. London: Chatto & Windus. [+info]

* Iser, Wolfgang. 1995. “On Translatability: Variables of Interpretation” @ *The European English Messenger* 4/1, 30-38. [+info]

Pârlog, Aba-Carina. 2019. *Intersemiotic Translation: Literary and Linguistic Multimodality*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot. [+info]

Schulte, Rainer and John Biguenet (eds). 1992. *Theories of Translation: an Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago. [+info]

* Steiner, George. 1975. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 (2nd. ed.) [+info]

Steiner, George. 1993. “From Caxton to *Omeros*: The continuing appeal of Homer to Anglo-Saxon ideals and experience”. @ *TLS* (August 27): 13-16.

Storey, John (ed.). 1994. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf. [+info]

Tymoczko, Maria. 1999. “Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation”. @ Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi (eds.) 1999. *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, 19-40. London: Routledge. [+info]

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1991. *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [+info]

Welch, Robert. 1993. *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing*. London: Routledge. [+info]

* Williams, Raymond. 1958. *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. London: Chatto & Windus. [+info]

Williams, Raymond. 1961. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus. [+info]

# Credits

## Rui Carvalho Homem

Rui Carvalho Homem is Professor of English at the University of Porto (Oporto), Portugal. His major areas of expertise include Early Modern English literature, Irish Studies, Translation Studies and Intermediality. He is the author of *Shakespeare and the Drama of Alterity* (in Portuguese; 2003) and *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland: Dislocations in Contemporary Writing* (2009). Edited volumes and/or special issues include *Relational Designs in Literature and the Arts: Page and Stage, Canvas and Screen* (2012); *Atlantic Communities: Translation, mobility, hospitality*, special issue of *Atlantic Studies*, 15:3 (2018; with María Teresa Caneda-Cabrera and David Johnston); and (as guest editor) a forum on Cultural Translation for *Shakespeare Studies* XLVI (2018).

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial License 4.0

Asociación Ibérica de Estudios de Traducción e Interpretación (AIETI)