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From *Talel* to Cultural Rights: The Challenge of Translating Transnational Discourse on Indigenous Rights in the Tseltal Area

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tensions and problems in the translation process of the terms “culture,” “tradition,” and “custom” in different versions of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples produced in Tseltal, a Maya language. Mirroring these translations with the meaning of all terms related to these concepts and used in the local’s everyday life allows assessing important semantic divergences between the source and target languages. These concepts became indispensable tools for intercultural dialogues in socio-political claims. A careful attention to their translation reveals the creation of intermediary semantic spaces using neologisms or attributions of new meaning to existing forms. It also underlines the desire of their authors to adapt universal discourse to local context, in a complex cross-cultural translation that meets external expectations and actors’ interests. [Keywords: Tseltal, cross-cultural translation, culture, tradition, custom, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples]

Introduction

In Central and South America, certain politically active Indigenous groups negotiate their place in the regional, national, and international political scene. For this purpose, they increasingly rely on United Nations texts that set out the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly those that concern their cultural rights. Some Latin American countries were among the first to ratify the first texts about civil and social rights of Indigenous people, the *Convention 107 concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries*, established in 1957 by the ILO (International Labor Organization within the UN). Dealing with “the Indigenous question,” these nations also ratified, in the early 1990s, the *Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries*, also established by the ILO. At least in the second version—which promotes respect for rights regarded as essential to the survival of Indigenous populations, guaranteeing their physical and spiritual integrity—one of the aims was to protect the “cultures” of which these populations are seen as the guardians. The United Nations then intensified this process in 2007 enacting the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, which broadens the scope of fundamental Indigenous rights. Although, Nation-States were not bound by them, the formulation of these normative principles

gave ethnic affiliation more weight as a relevant criterion of collective identity. The UNDRIP granted Indigenous peoples the right to self-determination on their territories, recognizing—among other things—the possibility that they could freely choose their political organization and develop their “cultures.”

The UNDRIP resulted from the need to establish collective rights for Indigenous peoples regardless of their country of residence, their regional social context, or the concrete historical and political processes in which they find themselves involved. It was therefore conceived in universal terms. However, since the rights it describes are relating to various Indigenous groups, it includes the possibility of their particularization. The terms “culture,” “tradition,” and “custom” are employed specifically to connect the universal with the local.¹

These terms present an obvious advantage from a legislative point of view. They are universal because all the groups have “cultures,” “traditions,” and “customs,” but they are also liable to refer to content that is specific to the peoples concerned. International institutions are eager to translate these texts, a desire shared by certain Indigenous activist groups who believe that this translation represents—politically and socially—a major issue. One of the challenges involved in promoting and circulating international rights among Indigenous populations is how they can be translated into the languages of these populations for better broadcast.

In the Mexican state of Chiapas, the ratification by their country of the Convention 169 of the ILO in 1990, coincided with an intensification of Indigenous groups’ political claims. These claims were expressed, on one hand, by the end of the hegemony of the dominant political party and the beginning of electoral democratization.² At the same time, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) also accelerated its development allowing the Zapatista rebel uprising in 1994.³ In the midst of these dynamic political shifts, Indigenous actors often began asking for autonomy in the administration rights over what they consider to be their territory. One of the innovative features of these organizations’ political projects was that they were no longer based in “class struggle” claims relying on the rhetoric of defense of peasant communities. They now relied on the register of identity, highlighting the ethnic origin of the groups involved. In their claims, the use of terminology relating to concepts of culture, tradition, or custom became an indispensable rhetorical tool. Most Indigenous groups collaborated with various civil society groups or state institutions which promoted Indigenous rights, and some authors like David Ronfeld *et al.* (1998) and Araceli Burguete (2004, 2011) pointed out the relevance of networking in the recent constructions of political- territorial projects. The circulation, within these new intermediary spaces, of knowledge and skills broadcast by international laws helped spread the idea that identity affiliation was beginning to represent a powerful tool for controlling territory. It is in this context that the translation of the UNDRIP into the most widely spoken Indigenous languages of Chiapas—including Tseltal

¹ See Eriksen (2001), Poirier (2004).

² See Valdès Vega (1998), Viqueira and Sonnleitner (2000).

³ See De la Fuente (2008), Leyva Solano and Burguete Cal y Mayor (2007).

language⁴, spoken, according to the latest surveys by the INEGI⁵(2015), by 560,000 speakers—became crucial.

However, transferring certain concepts from the source language to the target language presented several problems. The authors of a collective book on the local vocabularies of heritage pointed out that, in the translation process, “the transfer of signifiers puts the signified to the test and literally puts them to work” (Bondaz et al. 2014:17). In the same vein, and regarding the translation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* into Tzeltal, Pedro Pitarch (2001) emphasized that besides a linguistic translation, the text required an intercultural translation. According to this author, “faithfulness to the original becomes impossible if one wishes to maintain a meaning” (Pitarch 2001:127). The process of translating these rights can be compared to colonial missionary translations, which were also constrained by cross-cultural description and cross-linguistic translation. In his analysis of colonial missionary translation, William Hanks highlighted the use of “neologisms, newly coined uses for existing forms, proper names, or portions of the source text left untranslated in the target” (Hanks 2014:29). The need to introduce new doctrinaire concepts forced missionaries to mine the resources of the target language to find vocabulary which expresses better the idea they wished to convey—a vocabulary that was later reworked.

The terminology of colonial religious documents underwent a reconfiguration to make them more consistent with semantic categories relating to doctrinaire concepts, and the same process has been applied to contemporary legal documents. An examination of the translation process reveals conceptual and methodological choices made by the translators. These choices inform us about their intentions and their levels of involvement in the processes that lead to the co-construction of new vocabulary. This contribution will be divided in two parts that take different analytical approaches. The first part offers a semasiological examination (from the signs to the concepts) of the meaning of all terms in the local vocabulary frequently used in the everyday life that relates to the concepts of culture, tradition, or custom. In the second part, the terms will be examined in relation to these concepts in the translation of the UNDRIP. An onomasiological approach (from the concepts to the signs) will be used to analyze the observation of how the concepts of tradition, custom, and culture are correlated with the local vocabulary.

Mirroring of the two parts will make it possible to assess translational and semantic divergences between the terms of the source and target languages. It will also demonstrate the remarkable efforts of the translators to adapt universal discourse to a local context with particular political issues and to create intermediary semantics spaces. The choice to analyze two Tzeltal versions of the UNDRIP will also reveal different methodological choices in translation, which are probably inherent to the different political aims and degrees of co-

⁴ Tzeltal language is made up of several dialectical variants that can be traditionally divided into three broad regional categories: northern Tzeltal, central Tzeltal, and southern Tzeltal, under which the Aguacatenango variant falls.

⁵ Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography.

constructions of the groups or institutions behind these translations. The first version studied is the one initiated by the Mexican government and produced under the aegis of the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), a government body that promotes the development of Indigenous languages and encourages intercultural dialogue⁶. The second version, a bilingual publication, was realized by JManuel Silvano Gómez, member of the Indigenous Rights Center (CEDIAC)—a non-governmental organization which operates in the locality of Bachajón. It was published with civil society groups such as Amnesty International and other human rights bodies. To clarify some differences of translation, it is important to go back to the origin of this NGO. CEDIAC was created in 1992 by the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón. Long before the birth of CEDIAC, the actions of the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón, established in 1958, went far beyond the framework of religious inculturation efforts⁷, which also involved a reflection on the “Tseltal culture.” The mission has promoted, among other things, the creation of educational, health, and economic management programs. It was also behind the first translation of the Agrarian Law into Tseltal in the mid-1970s. CEDIAC’s translators are, thus, the heirs of a long practice of thinking and working in a context of political activism constructed in a greater intermediation. That could explain a better mastery of the technical terminology of the register of rights. But before assessing the extent of the translational divergences, it is necessary to review the local vocabulary of everyday terms relating to the concepts of culture, tradition, or custom.

Custom, Mode of Being, and Heritage: “Culture” in Everyday Life

To underline the difficulty of translating these terms, the first step will be to examine the common Tseltal conversational terms that are semantically similar to the concepts of culture, custom, and tradition. Without claiming to be exhaustive, I will systematically pick out expressions in several interviews I conducted or conversations I had between 2007 and 2016 in the Tseltal village of Aguacatenango with five different members of the population identifying themselves as traditionalists⁸. Except for a few interviews conducted to verify data mentioned in this article, the examples cited do not come from interviews or conversations focused on the use of these terms. They appear in conversations about various themes such as traditional organization and concepts, migration, conversion to other religious referents, or

⁶ If the translation was under INALI’s charge, the project of diffusion was jointly directed by two government organizations, the INALI and the CDI (*Comision Nacional para el desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas*), and two international organizations—the United Nations in Mexico and the *Consejo Mundial de Poblaciones Indigenas*.

⁷ In Christian missiology, the term inculturation refers to the effort to adapt the teaching of doctrine to a specific cultural tradition.

⁸ In this village, approximately one hour south of the city of San Cristobal de las Casas by car, the community has been deeply divided by the increasing conversion to new religious referents, the temporary urban migration phenomena and the diversification of economic activity. A certain section of the population now asserts a traditionalist lifestyle, respecting the customary politico-religious organization.

other topics of daily life. This inventory of the most common terms used in daily conversation will be supplemented by notes on other dialectal variants of Tseltal found in the multidialectal Tseltal dictionary (Polian 2017) and others published sources. However, this complement cannot present all Tseltal uses either. Besides dialectal variations, the great diversity of sociopolitical contexts in different Tseltal localities implies different uses of terms related to culture or tradition. The Tseltal traditionalists of Aguacatenango are not involved in networks of political activism, unlike, for example, the translator of CEDIAC. The two groups of actors, speakers of different dialects, could even be considered as being at opposite ends of the spectrum of the use of technical terms in the legal register.

For this inventory, let us first review those terms which are borrowed from Spanish. The terms “tradición” and “cultura” are seldom employed in everyday conversations that focus on these very concepts, neither in Spanish conversations nor in the form of borrowings in Tseltal conversations. By contrast—similar to what Anath Ariel de Vidas and Vincent Hirtzel (this volume) highlight regarding all Amerindian societies in Spanish-speaking America—the term *costumbre* is frequently used in the Spanish conversation of Aguacatenango Tseltal, demonstrating that it is a more integrated borrowing. It is also interesting to note that among these speakers, most of the other terms used in Tseltal whether borrowed or vernacular, are translated into Spanish as *costumbre*.

In Aguacatenango, the first of the two most common terms translated as *costumbre* is simply *kostumpre*, which is an integrated loanword—a loanword that has been phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically adapted to the receiving language, undergoing a semantic shift. Although the term refers to a set of unique collective practices, a semantic change is nevertheless observed regarding its usage in the source language. Its usage in Aguacatenango refers to the customary sociopolitical organization, which researchers studying Mesoamerica have called the “cargo system.” This model system of customary government is organized by the participation of all members of the village community, who take turns occupying religious and political positions⁹. In Aguacatenango, where this government is still the most powerful, it also requires everyone to contribute to the collective expenses.

Even more important, the use of the term *kostumpre* is thus limited to references to organization system and behavioral norms proper to the social life of that village’s community, whose members see themselves as heirs of their ancestors, effectively excluding reference to other groups’ “customs.”

1. *Ayto kostumpre te li’e*¹⁰

There is still **custom** here [i.e., the customary system of sociopolitical organization]

⁹ For a detailed description of the system in the village of Aguacatenango, see Marie Chosson (2012).

¹⁰ Each example of usage in Tzeltal presented here will be systematically followed by a translation of my own. It is intended to convey the original Tzeltal statement.

2. *Mak yak' scoperacion tuta **kostumpre**. Ja' te protestantea, ma'yukix **kostumpre***
They do not give their cooperation [collective financial cooperation] as it is the **custom**.
Those Protestants no longer have **custom**.

For the Aguacatenantecos traditionalists, the only *kostumpre* is their own. The individuals of the village group are the only ones who risk “losing” it, in which case, they would find themselves without any *kostumpre*, as in the second example. This use recalls the importance of what Miguel Bartolomé (1993) termed “residential identity,” which is considered as characteristic of Mesoamerica, resulting from “a historical process of sociopolitical fragmentation that encapsulates identities within local community spaces” (Barabas 2004).

This specific definition—referring to their local identity—enables Aguacatenantecos traditionalists to distinguish themselves from all other groups. One of the ways to refer to the customs of other groups outside the village community, or of groups within it that have “given up” *kostumpre*, is the use of the term *rason*, another lexical loanword of the Spanish. In Spanish *razón* (reason) can also be translated as “understanding, mind, or good sense” in some expressions. The borrowed term *rason* refers to the way of thinking and is also used (see, Example 5 below) by the Aguacatenantecos in reference to their own custom. Although it is semantically different from *kostumbre*, Aguacatenango traditionalists systematically translate it into Spanish as “custom.” In this way, they underline the fact that ways of thinking, which also guides ways of behaving¹¹, can be linked, in certain contexts, to the concept of “custom.”

3. *Mak jk'antikix ixta' **rason***
We do not want the bad **custom**.¹² [i.e., It is “the Tseltal Protestants’ way of thinking”].
4. *Ora ochix la nueve **rason**, ja' hichebi yan **rason***
Now the new **custom** has arrived, thus it is a different **custom**. [i.e., some Tseltal migrants’ way of thinking].
5. *Te catequisteetiki yu'un ja' stup' te **rasone** stukelik*
It is the catechists who are losing the **custom**.

Added to these integrated loanwords are other local language resources that can be translated as “costumbre” and that are more broadly used in the Tseltal area. The vernacular

¹¹ The link between way of thinking and way of behaving is clear in other uses of the term *rason*. The frequent use of the expression *ma' sna' rason* literally “He/She does not know the reason/good sense,” refers to the fact that “somebody does not know how to act with good sense.”

¹² The adjective *ixta'* can be translated as “bad,” “deceptive,” “wicked,” or “mischievous.”

term *talel*, which is based on the verbal root *tal* (to come) with a possessive mark, can be used in reference to the unique collective practices of different groups. The definition of *talel* in the colonial dictionary by Domingo de Ara (1986), written in the late 16th century, demonstrates evolution in its usage. The definition specifies that it was used to mean “custom, style, and condition,” but also “filiation, genealogy, descent, and ancestry”, emphasizing the meaning of the original root. It is therefore possible that the scope of this term became more limited over time, dropping this second meaning. Nowadays its usage belongs to a relatively broad semantic field. It usually refers to all types of behavior, from ways of being to ways of doing things. According to the commentary in the multi-dialectal Tselal dictionary (Polian 2017:563), it means not only “custom” but also “mode of being, character, inclination.” When *talel* relates to “character,” it refers to individual psychology:

6. *Lom amen **stalel** te winike [TENEJAPA]*¹³

The **character** of that man is to be very bad.

But it can also be used to evoke collective behaviors:

7. *Ya jpajbetikix **stalel** te kaxlane [CANCUC]*

Now we are adopting [Lit. We are uniting with them] the **ways of being** of the mestizo.

It is unsurprising that speakers regularly translate *talel* into Spanish as *modo* “mode,” an abstract term indicating a specific state in a continuum of possibilities or in a variable series. It’s also interesting to note that, in other contexts, it can be used to describe the ways of being and acting assigned to an animal species or to other specific non-human groups (like the saints or the masters of the earth).

A second term, *ts’umbal*, linked to custom, fully covers the semantic field of lineage. Derived from the verb *ts’un* “to sow” with the nominalizing suffix *-bal*, it refers to “seed.” As shown by Examples 8 and 9 below, it can be used in reference to both descendants and ascendants and is therefore translated as “lineage.”

8. *Banti jajchemik te **ats’umbale**? [CANCUC]*

Where is your **lineage** from? [Lit. Where did your ancestors begin?]

9. *Me chamon lajone, pues ya xlaj te **jts’umbale** [YAJALON]*

If I die, then my **lineage** will die [Lit. disappear].

¹³ All examples which state the sites of the dates in brackets were found in the multi-dialectal dictionary of Tselal by Gilles Polian (2017). Their translations, still my own, are based on the Spanish definitions in this dictionary. Please also note that in the following examples, *talel* is prefixed by the third-person possessive mark *s-*, meaning “his/her character/ways of being.”

Gilles Polian (2017: 660) has also reported its use to refer to a group of people originating from the same place, underlining the importance, in this area, of residential identity. A few examples also attest to the extension of its use to evoke tradition, translated as “costumbre,” stressing a continuity, an inheritance from ancestors.

10. *Ya me k'an tubuk sts'umbal yilel [OXCHUC]*

It would seem that their **customs** are going to be lost.¹⁴

It is also possible to distinguish widespread use of the metaphorical expression “the path of the ancestors” to evoke not only continuity in ways of living from one generation to the next, but also the fact that the people should find their “way” by following the path already followed by their ancestors, *me'il.tatil* “mother-father.”

13. *Ba jun beil la jta tal tul ch'ion tale pues ja' ta beel. ja' te unico beel, ja' te beel yu'un me'iltatiletik.*

The path I found while arriving, while growing up, it's the path, the only path, it's the **path of the ancestors**.

Through the stylistic device of drawing a parallel, which is common in Tseltal, another example shows the mirroring of custom in the evocation of this “path.”

14. *Ay te mach'a ma' xch'une, ya xch'ayik kostumpre, ya xch'ayik sbeil.*

There are those who do not believe (do not obey), they have lost the **custom**, they have lost their **path**.

The concepts of tradition and culture can also be evoked using the expression *xkuxlejal jme'jtatik* which translation is “our ancestor's life,” referring to their way of living. References to traditional activities or knowledge are also made by simple mentions to ancestors, accompanied or not by the temporal adverb *namey* “in the distant past” or by the adjective *antiwo*, a loanword from Spanish *antiguo* “ancient,” in expression like “as our ancestors (in the past) said” or “as our ancestors (in the past) did.”

Finally, the adjective *bats'il*, “true, authentic, original, natural” is used ethnocentrically by the Tzeltal to refer to themselves and can, therefore, be the equivalent of “Indigenous” in translation, as opposed to “foreign,” when it is used with certain nouns, as in *bats'il k'op* “Indigenous language/ authentic language,” *bats'il ahtal* “Indigenous calendar,” *bats'il swinkilel* “Indigenous/authentic inhabitant,” or *bats'il k'in* “Indigenous music.” As it refers to collective identity, it is sometimes translated as “traditional.”

Some vernacular terms or locutions are, in an onomasiological perspective, semantically

¹⁴ Polian (2017:355) gives the translation: “al parecer se van a perder sus costumbres.” In this case *ts'umbal* not only makes references to the lineage but to the customs inherited from the lineage.

likened—by their references to generational transmission and common ancestors—to the terms tradition, culture, or custom applied to a group. Some other terms more readily evoke extended ways of thinking, ways of being, characters, or ways of doing, individuals, or collectives, and not necessarily linked to an ethnic or residential identity. In this sense, they divert from the meaning of distinctive traits characterizing a society or social group, given by large international organizations like the UN. It is therefore unsurprising that the two terms most used to refer to custom as a system of local groups' practices, *kostumpre* and *rason*, are integrated lexical loanwords, semantically adapted and modified.

Culture, Tradition, and Custom in the Tseltal *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*

The original text of the UNDRIP obviously includes many occurrences of the terms tradition, custom, and culture and their derivative adjectives and adverbs (for examples “traditional,” “traditionally,” or “cultural”). The Spanish version of UNDRIP, which could be considered like the source text, contains twenty-nine instances of “tradition” or its derivatives, ten of “custom” or its derivatives, and thirty of “culture” or its derivatives. The semantic specificities of the vernacular terms and integrated loanwords just presented in the first part complicated the Tseltal translators' intellectual process. One of the aims of the Indigenous rights promotion policy, according to a UN document (2008), is to “raise the prestige of Indigenous languages by [...] promoting the use of Indigenous languages in public administration.” Both Tseltal versions endeavor to translate all the concepts into their language, rejecting Spanish loanwords and forcing themselves to mine the language's resources to produce or to use recent neologisms. This process is facilitated by the fact that the Tseltal language is, on one hand, a so-called agglutinating language that allows the formation of complex words, whose meaning is easily deductible by adding multiple affixes. On the other hand, as we will see, Tseltal speakers are familiar with the use of compound nouns to refer to a concept. Translators chose to use a technical terminology, ignoring the usual loanwords and beyond the language's evolution and the centuries-long historical process of interpenetration with Spanish that characterizes it today.

One of the uses of what appeared to be a recent creation is the paired nouns — *stalel.sk'ahyinel*—which could almost be considered as a compound noun and is widely used in both translations. We have already seen that the first noun, *stalel*, is frequently used in everyday conversation. This term also frequently appeared, in past Tseltal-language government publications, to translate “culture” or “tradition.” It is the case in the Tseltal translation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Pitarch 2001:142- 60) realized by Tseltal speakers of the locality of Cancuc. The term *stalel* also appears in another publication, the Tseltal translation of the San Andres Accords (2003) in which the terms “custom” or “culture” are systematically translated by the expression *stalel skuxlejalik* “the mode of being of their lives.” Both translators of the UNDRIP have chosen, to bridge the semantic gaps between local and international concepts to use *stalel* with another term *sk'ahyinel*, meaning “one's habit.” This one is a noun derived from the intransitive verbal root *k'ahy* (*k'ay* in other

dialectical variants), “habituating oneself to” (Polian 2017:322) or “to get used to.” To this root is added the third-person possessive prefix *s-*, the transitivizing suffix *-in* and the non-finite suffix *-el*. Ara’s colonial dictionary already contained a *k’ayin* entry with the translation “to ape, to imitate.” This verbal root and its transitive derivative are frequently used in conversation to refer to habituation processes, to mean for example that an individual has become accustomed, or gotten used to living in the city, or that someone has become accustomed to work hard, without any reference being made to collective practices or “custom.” But if *stalel* sometimes appears by itself, the nominalized form *sk’ahyinel* is never used without it. It would therefore seem that it must be considered like a compound noun. In the Spanish version of the UNDRIP, the term “custom” never appears without “tradition,” systematically linking the concept of shared habits with the concept of the transmission of a heritage. All these occurrences of “customs and traditions” are systematically translated by these paired nouns.

For example, in the extract from Article 33.1¹⁵:

Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a determinar su propia identidad o pertenencia conforme a sus costumbres y tradiciones.

** Te shumal me’bal o’bol ay yochelik te yilel skuxlejailk hich binut’il ya yal te stalel sk’aynelik (...)*

The Indigenous villages/peoples have the right to (have/maintain) what their look like and the way they say things **in accordance with their modes of being and their habits** (...)¹⁶

*** Te jujuwohc’ bats’il swinquilel lum ay yochel ta stuquel o’tantayel ya yak’ ta na’el mach’a ah stuquel ma’uc teme ta binjwohqu’il ay hich but’il ay te stalel sc’ahyninel.*

Every authentic inhabitant of his territory has the right to make themselves known, who they are or not, from what group they are, and how **their modes of being and habits** are.

¹⁵ In examples of translations of articles from the *UNDRIP*, I systematically transcribe the original Spanish article, followed by INALI’s translation (preceded by an asterisk), and/or CEDIAC’s translation (preceded by two asterisks). I have respected the graphical conventions of the original documents, which differ from one to the other. Finally, I present my own “literal” translation from the Tzeltal, realized, for certain parts, with the help of Antonia Sántiz Girón. This *verbum pro verbo* translation intentionally reflects the primary meaning of the Tzeltal expressions used.

¹⁶ The adjective *o’bol*, is translated in Gilles Polian’s (2017) dictionary as “poor, suffering.” Even if I cannot explain the choice of the translator, it is possible that, in this case, poverty and suffering are viewed as symptomatic of the condition of Indigenous peoples. The term *lumal* refers to “the land” (i.e., the place) where a person lives—his or her village. By extension, it also designates people who come from the same place. Like the dual meaning of the Spanish term *pueblo*, it is also used to designate a population. I comment further on this meaning later in this article.

The term *sk'ahyinel* embraces the concept of custom as shared habits, in quite a different way from the use of the loanword *kostumpre* in Aguacatenango everyday life. If its combination with *stalel* reminds us of the Spanish association with custom and tradition, it also coincides with a common stylistic figure and grammar construction in Mesoamerica's languages and rhetorical forms of parallelism: the diphrasism. According to Aurore Monod Becquelin and Cédric Becquey (2008:123), a diphrasism consists in “connecting two lexemes, as a way of constructing a new meaning expressing a single idea, in which the ultimate meaning is not coextensive with the sum of the meaning of these two components.”¹⁷ The fact that *stalel.sk'ahyinel* is also extensively used to translate the term tradition, and its derivatives, when they appear alone, make us consider it like a diphrasism. The compound noun *stalel.sk'ahyinel* was already used to refer to the term “culture” in the textbook of the “Diploma in Tseltal Culture and National Language and Culture,” published by the Public Education Secretariat and written by Eugenio Maurer Avalos (2006), a Jesuit priest and researcher in social anthropology, who works in Bachajón. It also appears in various publications of the CEDIAC. It then became a shared tool for both translators to convey this imported concept by a linking of modality (being), expressed by *talel*, with shared (imitated) habit, conveyed by *sk'ahyinel*. In this way, they make it possible to go beyond the sole reference to the former by incorporating a collective dimension. The fact that both versions broadly used this compound noun can lead us to consider that its use is already fixed, at least in the legal speech. However, faced with the absence of its use in Aguacatenango, and after a survey among speakers, the semantic innovation created by the combination of the two terms to refer to the concepts of tradition or custom, is unintelligible for Tseltal people not involved in political and legal claims which, moreover, have other resources to express what they consider as similar concepts.

If this compound noun is used by both versions, the translation of the term “culture” reveals important differences. Whereas in the INALI version, instances of the noun *cultura* and its adjectival derivative *cultural* are translated as *stalel* with or without *sk'ahyinel*, the translators of the CEDIAC version have chosen to create a new expression, *me'iltatimbil*, fixed as it is systematically recurrent. In fact, comparing the two versions sheds light on the various methodological translation choices made by the two institutions involved. The INALI version mainly aims to provide the general content of these rights, using common language and omitting some parts of the text. On the other hand, the CEDIAC version attempts to be more exhaustive, indeed literal, and therefore is more inclined to introduce neologisms or new semantizations. These neologisms were probably thought of and worked on over decades of efforts in translating other texts by CEDIAC and, more widely, the Jesuit mission in Bachajón. They are then systematically repeated throughout the text. Every instance, in the Spanish version, of the term *culture*, or its derivatives, is translated by the word *me'iltatimbil*, alone or as a complement of *stalel.sk'ahyinel*. This expression is based on another compound noun: *me'il.tatil* or mother-father, which refers to generic ancestors.

¹⁷ There are a lot of examples of lexicalization of diphrasism in Tseltal, like the words *chan.balam* (Lit. snake-jaguar) which means “animals,” or *k'al.na* (lit. field-house) which refers to the “properties owned by somebody.”

It is formed by appending to this compound noun the ordinary transitivizing suffix *-in*, which means “to treat/use/regard as,” and the perfect passive aspectual suffix *-bil*. It can be translated as “those who were once regarded as ancestors.”

For example, in this extract from Article 16.2:

[...] *Los Estados, sin perjuicio de la obligación de asegurar plenamente la libertad de expresión, deberán alentar a los medios de información privados] a reflejar debidamente la diversidad cultural indígena.*

* [...] *yu'un chicnajuc ta na'beyel sbah ta lec te yantic yilel me'iltatimbil stalel sc'ahyinel bats'il ants winic.*

[...] so that in their knowledge appear as well as possible the different appearance of **the mode of being and habits of those who are regarded as ancestors** by the true (Indigenous) men and women.

It also appears alone, for example, in Article 14.1:

[Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a establecer y controlar sus sistemas e instituciones docentes que impartan educación en sus propios idiomas,] en consonancia con sus métodos culturales de enseñanza y aprendizaje.

** [...] *ta st'umbeyel sbehlal nohpteswanej soc p'ijubteswanwej ta bin me'iltatimbil yu'un.*”

[...] following the path of how learning and teaching were done by **those who are regarded by them as ancestors**

In the CEDIAC version, this reference, in the translation of the term “culture,” to a meta-ancestrality deeply rooted in the past shows us an inversion of the semantics of the terms found in the source texts. In our languages, tradition refers to past transmission even if dynamic. Here, it is translated as *stalel.sk'ahyinel*, mode of being and shared habits—without temporal references, reminding that in everyday use *talel* is more used to refer to character or shared modalities. In contrast, the translation of culture—which in Spanish and English common use, as well as in ONU’s use, refers to the set of distinctive traits that characterize a society or social group—is, here, more liable to refer to the transmission of the ancestors’ heritage. This choice is probably inherent to the vocabulary of the everyday life, which, as we’ve seen, has other resources that remind the continuity from one generation to the next of the ways of living. The use of *stalel* was already common in the legal or educational literature in Tseltal to translate tradition, without exactly covering the concept of heritage. The translators of the CEDIAC version probably choose, to underline this idea, to transfer it on the translation of the term “culture.” It reveals us their perfect knowledge not only of Tseltal everyday life vocabulary but also of the translation practices of their predecessors. However, once again, if these expressions are intelligible to Tseltal

speakers, their uses are reserved for certain limited contexts.

The Institutionalization of Tradition: Politico-Religious and Social Systems of Organization

Another difficult task for the translators lies in the references to the systems of government and organization. In everyday Aguacatenango Tseltal usage, the integrated loanword *kostumpre* designates politico-religious and social systems of organization. In the Spanish version of UNDRIP, references to what could be called “custom control systems” are usually represented by the expression “their institutional organizations,” a choice that omits their “traditional” or “customary” character. It is indeed interesting that in articles 20.1 and 34, administrative responsibilities are, in both Tseltal versions, designated by the single term *a’tel*, meaning “work.” In Catherine Good’s (2011) analysis of the Nahuatl concept of “work,” she points out that throughout Mesoamerica, beyond simply designating manual activity, this term commonly encompasses ritual activities or those that benefit the group. In Tseltal, the term *a’tel* has the same semantic extension as it could relate to individual work, but also responsibility, office or charge assigned to a person (Polian 2017:40). The use of this term by the translators matches in a certain extent with the use, in everyday Tseltal, of the loanword *kostumpre*. In this way, it reintegrates the traditional or customary character of service to the common good as the quintessence of Indigenous administrative responsibilities. It should be noted that in today’s Indigenous localities, formal system of government regulated by state law most often coexist with customary systems of government to which translators refer when using this term.

Particularly in the INALI’s version, the translator also emphasizes on the traditional character of these systems of government by using references to “paths.” This use, which has already been mentioned about everyday usage, recalls the instruction to follow an itinerary that has been marked out and has roots in the distant past. The connected use of the two terms *sbe(h)lal* and *a’tel*, “one’s path” and “work,” is frequent. Although the terms equivalent to “tradition” or “custom” are not explicitly mentioned in this case, their evocation is understood through this reference to continuity.

For example, in this extract from Article 34:

Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a promover, desarrollar y mantener sus estructuras institucionales y sus propias costumbres, espiritualidad, tradiciones, [...] procedimientos, prácticas y, cuando existan, costumbres o sistemas jurídicos

**Te me’bal o’boletike ay yochelik yu’un ta yilel, spasel, sok sk’uxultayel te binut’il sbelal te ya’telike sok nix te stalelik, sch’ulelik, sk’ayinelik [...]*

The Indigenous have the right to watch [control], exercise, and maintain **the paths of their responsibilities/work**, as well as their modes of being, their spiritualities, their habits [...]

***Te jujwohc' bats'il swinquilel lum ay yochel ta stijel, smuc'ubtesel soc scuxajtesel te bin ut'il chapal te jwohc' tehc'ambil yu'un ta sjelolic, soc te stalel sc'ahyinel, sch'uhunel jol o'tanil, me'iltatimbil talel c'ahyinel [...]*

Every authentic inhabitant of one's territory has the right to move [direct] himself, to keep alive, and to make grow: the way they correctly agreed to replace each other¹⁸, their mode of being, custom, and spirituality of their head and heart, the mode of being and custom of those who were considered ancestors [...]

It is important to note, based on the same example, that the CEDIAC's translator uses a more inclusive definition of "their institutional organizations," not only focused on the customary forms of government. Their translations insist more in the collective dimension indicated by the frequent use of certain stative verbs based on positional words. The words most often used to evoke organization are derived from the transitive verb root *chap*, which can be translated as "to arrange, to resolve, to organize, or to plan something." We can thus find in the text numerous occurrences of the positional form of this root, *chapal*, "being resolved, agreed upon, ordered or planned" and of the intransitive verb form *chahpaj* "to resolve itself." By choosing the use of positional or intransitive forms rather than the transitive form, the traductor aims at emphasizing not the action itself of solving or arranging but its result. He thus refers to the agreement and harmony within the entity in question. Its frequent use is not surprising since the term *chahpajibal*—literally "the place where something is settled or organized"—is commonly used in Tseltal conversation in reference to institutions such as the court or municipal agency (Polian 2017:92). The positional root *yom*, and its derivatives, are also frequently used. Its literal translation refers to the state of "finding oneself in a pile." But it is also used to mean that things or people are or have been "brought together or grouped." In the CEDIAC's translation, the use of *yom* is designed to remind the idea of consensus among members of the same group. As CEDIAC's translator himself stated in an interview (Cubells Aguilar 2011:61), he also chose the positional *yomol* to refer to "collective rights."

The will of the CEDIAC's translator to extend the reference to institutions other than the customary one, are partially neutralized, in some understandings, by the term chosen to translate the concept of community. In the UNDRIP, "community" is understood as the basic unit of the cultural group. In both versions, it is usually translated by one of the only loanwords of the Tseltal versions, the term "*komunal*" or "*komonal*." According to a Tseltal speaker of Aguacatenango, the definition of *komunal* is "here where we work, here where we do our cooperation, our service [for the common good], and our milpa" (own translation).¹⁹ Less than a reference to a group, the loanword *komunal* is here defined as the place of both individual work and group work through the reference to the social sphere

¹⁸ "To replace each other" refers here to the succession, year after year, of individuals holding office in the customary organization system.

¹⁹ Own english traduction of the tseltal sentence.

in which, in this case, the customary hierarchical system of responsibilities and cooperation is practiced. Reminding us of the everyday use of the loanword *kostumpre*, it thus excludes members of the village who do not “follow the tradition.” Willingly or not, translators managed to make coincide a unique signifier to the two different signified—the one of the community, as mobilized in the international legal speech of the UNDRIP, and the other, as it evolves in some Tseltal dialects.

Conclusion

This brief foray into the twists and turns of the intellectual process of translating international rights into Indigenous language makes it possible to highlight the difficulties involved in translating concepts relating to the semantic field of custom, tradition or culture. The local everyday vocabulary of traditionalist Tseltal speakers of Aguacatenango cannot be considered as representative of all uses in Tseltal language. But the fact that these actors are not engaged in political activism provides a striking contrast, which can be nuanced in other dialects or with other categories of population, to the Tseltal technical terminology used by the UNDRIP’s translators. By comparing their vocabularies, it becomes possible to show the resources exploited to bridge the semantic gaps between local and international conceptions. In most examples of this analysis, translators took advantage of the dominant stylistic figure or grammar construction process in this language to form or use new paradigms—the common use of parallelism realized by fixing a compound noun and the possibility of derivation of existent signifiers by adding affixes. They thus enrich the already existing polysemy of the derivatives of these roots. One, therefore, sees a vocabulary being used that is based, at the very least, on commonly used verbal or nominal roots.

But what appears more important in this analysis is that if the neologisms, like *stalel.sk’ahyinel* or *me’iltatimbil*, are easily intelligible for Tseltal people, their creation does not strictly respond, like the vocabulary used for colonial evangelization, to a need to describe a new object. They are also of no use in daily life and outside the context of an intercultural interaction of claims. As we’ve seen, local vocabulary has other resources to express what they considered as similar concepts and the normative principles represented by declarations of rights are, like everywhere, used very little by most of the local Indigenous population.

The differences between the two Tseltal versions offer us other clues. INALI’s version translator tends to use more common Tseltal language to transcribe the general content of the UNDRIP, sometimes omitting large portions of text, which he or she probably does not consider relevant in the local context. The CEDIAC’s version translator is making more efforts to supply a more exhaustive translation using a fixed technical terminology in a bilingual publication that creates more deliberately new semantic spaces. This version is indeed the result of decades of collective work, between Tseltal activists, Tseltal population of Bachajón

and non-Indigenous civil society,²⁰ about translation of concepts. Although the terms used in these translations are useless for everyday use, their manipulation makes it possible to establish an indispensable intercultural dialogue that meets external expectations, while still serving the interests of these actors. The main point of mastering this international vocabulary is to acquire a certain legitimacy and a certain power in this context of political activism.

The way of translating the expressions “organization’s system” or “community” is another clue that translators primarily regard them as tools for communication and claims directed at the outside world. Through the emphasis made on the reference to the village community as the quintessential cultural unit, their use contributes to invisibilize the tendency for inhabitants of one village to adopt multiple, heterogeneous identify affiliations. Tseltal region is shaken by a great deal of conflict and violence between villages or town, arising from political, religious, or socioeconomic divisions and agrarian conflicts. This situation is fomenting the desire to defend or assert the legitimacy of various factions: traditionalists, revolutionaries, Protestants, catechists, or simply progressives who reject the traditional system.²¹ But in the context of political claims, all these groups understand perfectly the necessity to attenuate this multiplicity of identity referents and the importance, in their dialogue to obtain certain rights, to give the impression of an underlying unity of “cultural” referents in one single village. Also, by using broadly Tseltal terms as *a’tel* or *komunal*, both translators take even more advantage of what I will call intermediary semantic spaces. In these places, by moving the cursor over a continuum of values, the same term can coincide, with partial overlap, both with its meaning in everyday vocabulary and with the meaning of the literal translation of the external concept.

These processes of translation cannot be fully understood without being connected to the new privileged form of organization of political and territorial claims on Chiapas based on networked action.²² This networked action refers here to model of collective organization based on coordination and exchange in an intermediary space (Castells 1998, Musso 1997). This space should, in the global civil society discourse, implies “the horizontality and flexibility of relationships” (Pépin Lehalleur 2007:18-21). The important development of these intermediate and innovative spaces, frontier spaces between the outside and the inside of the community, has contributed to the emergence of new Indigenous actors and leaders. These actors move in what can be considered as a new social milieu they are both co-creators, defenders, and representatives. The processes of translation of the UNDRIP were realized in

²⁰ JManuel Silvano, the translator, recalls the importance, in his work, of the thoughts previously conducted for the translation of the Bible and other documents. He also indicates the necessary step to validate the translation proposals with various representatives of the population of Bachajón (Cubells Aguilar 2011:61).

²¹ About conflict and violence, see Martínez Velasco (2005) or Rivera Farfán et al. (2005). In reference to involvement in revolutionary movements, like the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the EZLN, which has a significant presence in the region, and has created around thirty “autonomous” areas in the 1990s, see Baschet (2005) as well as Leyva Solano and Burguete Cal y Mayor (2007).

²² Presented in Chosson (2017).

these intermediary spaces, which unites government institutions and Tseltal within the INALI and NGO's activists and Tseltal within the CEDIAC. The choice of the translators of these texts to use neologisms that are *a priori* useless in everyday life—or their desire to make various signified of the same signifier coincide—can be explained by the fact that it is only in these intermediary spaces that these terms acquire meaning and can be mobilized. If these translations are seen as powerful tools in contemporary claims, only the future will tell us if these terms end up being lexicalized and become more widely integrated into the Tseltal vocabulary.

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