

Module 4: Theories of translation

Lecture 12: Poststructuralist Theories and Translation

The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  Martin Heidegger
-  Foucault
-  Deconstruction
-  Influence of Derrida
-  Relevant translation

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Introduction

The title of this lecture might mislead you into thinking that there is something like a poststructuralist theory of translation. There isn't. But the theories of language that evolved after Derrida and deconstruction (which can generally be classified as poststructuralist) revolutionized the concepts of language and meaning, and they had an impact on translation also. So this lecture is basically an attempt to understand a different direction taken by translation studies. To understand this new direction, it is necessary to understand the concepts that influenced translation theory.

Derrida's theory of deconstruction influenced translation to a great degree. If there is no unified text or stable meaning, then what is left to 'carry over'?

Derrida's theory of deconstruction undermined the concept of stability of structures and fixity of meanings. According to him, there is no fixed relationship between signified and signifier, or word and meaning; meaning is continuously deferred along a chain of signifiers. As Gentzler puts it, "at the foundation of Derrida's thought is the assumption that there is no kernel or deep structure or invariant of comparison, nothing that we may ever discern – let alone represent, translate, or found a theory on" (147). Now if we accept this premise, then we have to reformulate the concept of translation as the carrying over of the 'meaning' of a source text into the target language. If there is no stable meaning or rather, a stable text, then what can we possibly carry over? Can we really make a distinction between the 'original' and 'translation'? Deconstruction thus prompts us to reconsider the very foundation of the process of translation. This theory would invert the basic binary inherent in accepted notions of translation, which is that of the 'original' source text and the 'secondary' translation in the target language. Derrida's perspective blurs the boundaries between the original and the translation.

However, it is not just Jacques Derrida whose theories influenced translation – there were others like Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault.

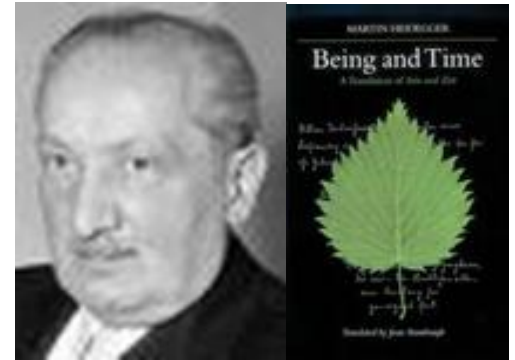
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Martin Heidegger

Heidegger's philosophical work *Being and Time* (1927) is considered to be the forerunner of deconstruction. In this work he was questioning the conditions for existence or being. Heidegger's theory was that being is not something that can be conceived of as an entity that is external to the being that questions, or the place from which that question arises. Being is not an entity or idea that can be understood or represented. Heidegger's interrogation of being also led him on to question the accepted belief of the reliability language. Language is the force that constitutes the knowing being. Gentzler explains:

“Translation is viewed as an action, an operation of thought, a translation of our selves into the thought of the other language, and not a linguistic, scientific transfer from something into the present” (155). Thus, man is the subject of language and disappears in it. Heidegger wanted language to speak for itself without any metaphysical abstractions.



How is all of this related to translation theory? Translation, in as much as it is a language-oriented activity, is also a return to the originary experience of language. Heidegger explained his concepts of translation through the essay “The Anaximander Fragment” in his book *Early Greek Thinking*. He compares two translations of this ancient Greek text – one by Nietzsche in 1873 and another by Herman Diels in 1903. He argues that both are firmly rooted in the western philosophical tradition and are bound to translate the text very much in those terms. He attempted to step outside of this epistemological framework, as it were, and approached the text from another perspective, which was dissociated from place and time. He allowed the language to speak to him without the weight of years or place to hinder him. This could be made possible by listening to the silences in the text or the unsaid things rather than the said. This was to pave the way for Derrida's concept of language later on.

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Foucault

Another text which played an important role in poststructuralist theory was Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" which radically questions the notion of authorship. Foucault denies the privilege of authority to a single author. He does not subscribe to the view that a text written by a particular person is his/her territory over which s/he has the sole interpretive rights. Instead, he suggests that a work is not the creation of a single person, but the product of the mingling of a host of factors including the time and place in which the author is located. It is thus as much a product of the times, as that of a person. "The 'act of creation' is in reality a series of complex processes that the designation 'author' serves to simplify" (Gentzler 150). So the author is not really a single individual, but a series of "subjective positions, determined not by any single harmony of effects, but by gaps, discontinuities, and breakages" (Gentzler 150).



Foucault distinguishes between the classical and modern concepts of language. The classical conception was that language could capture reality, that there was a universal principle underlying everyday reality that can be expressed through language, and that there is a subject that knows and expresses itself through language. He points out Linnaeus's painstaking classification of the natural world as symptomatic of this classical tendency to classify and know. But by the end of the eighteenth century, a rupture occurs in this harmony, marking the beginning of the modern age. Language becomes self-conscious, and the subject of discourse is discourse itself. The author does not use the language, language 'uses' him. According to Gentzler, what Foucault is suggesting is a double break: languages are cut off from the things that they can represent, and they are also broken off from the general continuity found in the natural world. So, language has a life of its own, it is no longer the medium used by us to express things, but rather we are the mediums chosen by language to speak itself. It is not the carrier of meaning but is self-referential. In this context it makes no sense to speak of a particular author's meaning or structure, as everything is fluid.

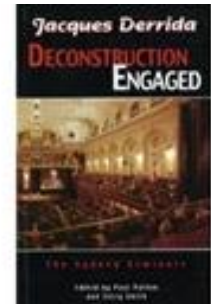
Foucault, like other deconstructionists, argue that we have to be aware of that which slips through the net of language even as we try to express it in writing. This "other" which is the dark shadow of expressed thought, remains unmentioned or repressed. It is this which deconstruction sought to listen to. Translation in a way bears the imprint of this repressed other, because in the search for equivalence, it unwittingly opens up the plurality of a word, sentence and thereby the entire text. In its search for equivalence, what it comes up with are more words. The translation acknowledges the impossibility of complete equivalence which is also an acceptance of the continuous play of words that give rise to further words.

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Deconstruction

Derrida's concept of deconstruction was more or less along similar lines. His thoughts on translation are preoccupied with the notion of the absence behind the presence or the other that shadows the written / spoken word. According to him, western metaphysics has always been obsessed about “being as presence”, or absolute truth-values. It is this “logocentric” obsession with definitive truth-values that he undermined through his theory. He analysed (destroyed) a text to lay bare its inherent contradictions, to construct another narrative out of it, thereby showing that there is no stable text with a unified meaning. The absence or the lack behind the word that is present, is what he denotes as ‘trace’. In translation, he is not concerned with the original message or the adequacy of its rendition into another language, but is interested in the complicated paths that a text follows in its translation into another language. Gentzler argues that Derrida's concept of the ‘play of the trace’ when applied to translation theory, is not the identification of meaning but movement along uncharted territory. Just as play of the trace “can never be presented...as one tries to stop its movement and grasp it, it disseminates, separates, and continues to move on, crossing over to another place” (160), translation is also an exercise in which whatever is attempted to be carried over tends to evaporate. So translations never fix meaning but allow for infinite play and open up new possibilities. However, despite the fact that there is no stable meaning or text to carry over, the translator/translation desires to represent a unified “kernel” or universal fact.



Translation illustrates the play of signifiers, as one word is getting replaced by another word, thereby constituting a chain of signifiers. Derrida believes that we are playing with many language systems even when using one language. Therefore, even the act of writing becomes an act of translation.

This, according to Derrida, is a futile activity; because there is no meaning behind words, but only words that explain other words. It is just a superficial chain of signifiers. Translation is an activity that reminds us most of the plurality of languages and meanings. His argument is that even when we are writing in one language, we are writing in different languages as we are choosing some meanings over others. So even the act of writing becomes an act of translation. Every language contains the elements of other linguistic systems within itself and the writer is juggling words from one system or the other. This process of choosing and elimination of words carries within it the

silences which we actually have to listen to.

In fact, according to Derrida, translation is an impossibility. He would much rather have the term 'transformation' or rather 'regulated transformation': "Difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another" (qtd in Gentzler 167). Derrida effectively undermines the basic idea behind translation: that of a stable meaning inhering in the source text that has to be carried over to the target language. Equivalence is no longer an issue because there is no 'meaning' as such that has to be retained intact.

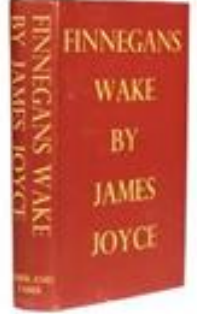
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Influence of Derrida

It is difficult to make an exact assessment of the influence of Derrida on translation as such. We can only say that post-structuralist theories on the whole have definitely altered the perspectives on language and meaning, which in turn have influenced translation theories also. It goes against traditional theories of translation that believe in the authority of the source text and equivalence. Gentzler points out that such a theory of translation is subversive, using James Joyce's translation of his own *Finnegans Wake* as an example. Joyce's notoriously difficult work is multi-lingual, but Joyce resorted to just one language when he translated it into Italian. Here he experimented with various dialects in the same language, underlining the 'disorder' that exists beneath the surface within a language. Derrida also was essentially pointing to the same factor. When Derrida says that all languages are basically translations, he is challenging the accepted notion of stable language and fixed meanings. This is a liberation of sorts for translators who are limited by the harsh demands of equivalence and adequacy in translation.



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Relevant Translation

Derrida himself was deeply interested in the concepts behind translation and has written extensively on the subject. One of his essays “What is a “Relevant” Translation?” states: “A relevant translation is a translation whose economy, in these two senses, is the best possible, the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible” (*Critical Inquiry* Winter 2001: 179). By the ‘two senses’ of economy he means the ‘property’ and ‘quantity’ of the meaning. Property would refer to the most appropriate of the meanings possible and quantity to the word/s used by the target language to represent the source text. So by economy of translation he means a word that can capture the meaning of the original in all its widest connotations; the translation that can appropriate the meaning of the source text in as few words is a relevant translation. He further states: “every translation should be relevant by vocation. It would thus guarantee the survival of the body of the original (survival in the double sense that Benjamin gives it in “The Task of the Translator, “fortleben and überleben: prolonged life, continuous life, living on, but also life after death)” (*Critical Inquiry*: 199). Derrida exemplifies his statement by translating Portia's famous plea for mercy in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. He plays upon the word ‘seasons’ in the line “When mercy seasons justice”. Refuting Victor Hugo's word “tempère” for seasons, Derrida chooses “relève” because he believes that the word ties together “three gestures” of the word ‘seasons’. It conveys the sense of cooking, of elevation (mercy elevates the concept of justice) and also a sense of relief. The last meaning, argues Derrida, gives it a wider philosophical dimension which is derived from Christian philosophy of mercy and compassion. So the sentence in translation would imply that mercy “elevates, replaces and interiorizes the justice that it seasons” (*Critical Inquiry*: 197).



The meticulous detailing of methodology given by Derrida is also an answer to those who criticize him and his theory for allowing too much freedom for interpretation. They feel that one can interpret a text in far-fetched and outlandish ways using deconstruction theory and get away with it. If this is true, then translation would mean a free-for-all where texts can be translated in whichever way one wants. However it is clear that Derrida's concepts do not allow for such anarchic freedom. It just liberates the word from the tyranny of a fixed meaning and allows it to play out its possibilities, but within certain limits. With the help of this theory, the translator does not have to be a menial who has to be in bondage to the source text, but a creator who samples, chooses and uses words to create another text with a life of its own.

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Impact of the theory

What is the influence of post-structuralist theories on translation? The major influence was felt in the rethinking about the concepts of text, author and meaning. If translation theory is not very obsessed about fidelity, then it is in part due to the post-structuralist theories that swept the literary world. However, it also gave rise to the feeling that a text can yield multiple meanings, and that any far-fetched meaning is relevant. The meticulous detailing of translation methodology given by Derrida above, is also an answer to those who criticize him and his theory for allowing too much freedom for interpretation. It demonstrates that it is wrong to assume that one can interpret a text in far-fetched and outlandish ways using the theory of deconstruction and get away with it. If this is true, then translation would mean a free-for-all where texts can be translated in whichever way one wants. However it is clear that Derrida's concepts do not allow for such anarchic freedom. It just liberates the word from the tyranny of a fixed meaning and allows it to play out its possibilities, but within certain limits. With the help of this theory, the translator does not have to be a menial who has to be in bondage to the source text, but can be a creator who samples, chooses and uses words to create another text with a life of its own.

Assignments

1. What was the contribution of poststructuralist theories to the concepts of language and meaning?
2. How do these theories alter the traditional concepts of translation?

References

Derrida, Jacques. "What is a "Relevant" Translation?". Trans. Lawrence Venuti. *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2001), pp. 174-200.

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