










Module 3: Central Issues in Translation

Lecture 6: Functions of Translation

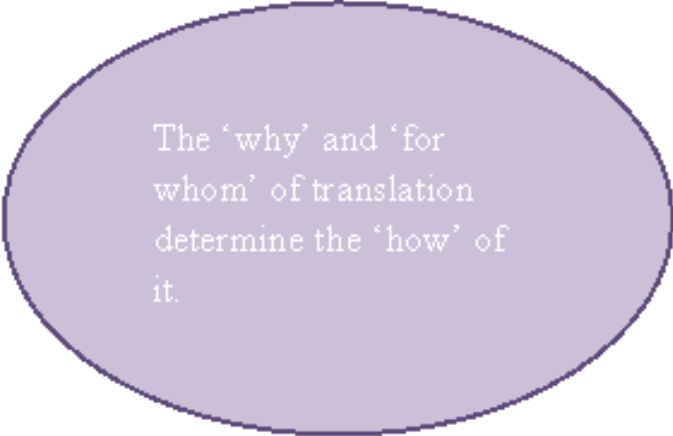
The Lecture Contains:

-  Functions of Translation
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Functions of Translation

It is by now clear that translation means more than substitution of words in one language with those from another. In some ways it is the attempt to bring two cultures together. It is an accepted fact that languages differ from each other not just in grammatical structure but also the way in which they conceptualise abstractions. The question of how to bridge the gap between SL and TL is decided by the aim of the translation/translator and its intended reader; this is a perspective agreed upon by most theoreticians in the field. Lawrence Venuti says that the basic issues in translation theory remain “equivalence and shifts, audience and function, identity and ideology” (*The Translation Studies Reader*, 341). Eugene Nida lists three basic factors that decide the nature of translation. They are: “the nature of the message to be translated, the purpose of the writer or translator, and the type of readership” (qtd in Venuti 127). Hans J. Vermeer terms the aim of the translator as ‘skopos’. According to his skopos theory, “skopos and mode of realization [of translation] must be adequately defined if the text-translator is to fulfil his task successfully” (Venuti 221). Once this has been decided, one of the primary choices the translator has to make is whether s/he wants to translate literally or not. If the purpose of the translation is to communicate a message, there is a high probability of the translator evolving his/her own methods of communicating the message correctly; literal translation might not always work in this context. This might not be the case with a work of literature.



The ‘why’ and ‘for whom’ of translation determine the ‘how’ of it.

There are identifiable contexts to which particular modes of translation are suitable.

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Communication of Information

In some cases, the content gets precedence over form. For instance, notices put up in airports or railway stations are bilingual, if not multilingual. Important notices that give information have to be in different languages in international airports where you have travellers from all parts of the world. Here the translation has to be such that it gives the meaning without any distortion. The same is true for manuals that come with appliances. In these cases, the translator might not be able to do a literal translation, as languages differ from each other in structure as well as semantics. But the emphasis is on the reader and the aim is to make the reader who does not know the other language, understand what is being said. This is very much a reader-oriented translation where the translator is completely subservient to the message that is to be communicated. The translator can safely claim that there is no loss in translation here or rather, he cannot afford loss in translation. In some cases sign language is used avoid confusion.

This is quite common with traffic signals which are a universal language of sorts. Road signs are usually accompanied by pictures or signs that are universally understood. Here a semiotic system or sign language is utilised to overcome the potential hazards of not comprehending a road sign in another language. In other words this is a context where the translator cannot afford breakdown of communication or loss in translation. To make the message clear s/he might have to make suitable changes in the word order or choose a word that might not be the literal equivalent of the original. What is significant here is that the aim of the translator is not just to pass on information but also to ensure that the reader has understood the message. The reader is king in these forms of translation as the whole process is aimed at him/her.



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Scientific or technical matter

Today English is the language of knowledge and most of the scientific and technical literature is written in that language. Translation of such works into other languages becomes even more of a challenge. A scientific article in medicine, for example, can be translated only by somebody who has proficiency in two languages as well as at least a working knowledge of medicine. Equivalents of technical terms are difficult because some of them cannot be conceived of in a particular language. Even simple terms like 'switch' or 'railways' do not have adequate Indian language equivalents simply because they were products of the western scientific system. The translator has to be aware of these pitfalls when s/he is translating work of this nature. The reader again becomes important here; if it is intended for a student, the translation has to take care that it does not alienate the student by being too technical. Terms and words have to be chosen carefully.

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Translation of Literary Language

Translation of literature poses serious problems for the translator because creative writing uses words with multiple purposes. Here content and form are equally important. The ancient Indian theoretician Anandavardhana has stated that the distinctive feature of literary/poetic language is *dhvani* or the range of suggestions contained in the work. The translator has to bring this world of connotations alive in the TL also, which is not a mean task. S/he also has to reproduce the stylistic beauty of the SL text. The beauty of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, lies in the splendour of Marquez's magical realism; the translator has to be skilled in both Spanish and English to do justice to the SL text. Idioms and metaphors which abound in poetic use of the language are often difficult to recapture in the TL because of the structural differences between languages. In fact some feel that complete translatability is not a criterion of good craftsmanship as far as a literary work is concerned. Justin O'Brien who has translated Camus from French into English, quotes Raymond Guerin: “the most convincing criterion of the quality of a work is the fact that it can only be translated with difficulty, for if it passes readily into another language without losing its essence, then it must have no particular essence or at least not one of the rarest” (qtd by Nida in *The Translation Studies Reader* 133). It is the awareness of all these challenges that is behind the concept of the impossibility of perfect equivalence.



The challenges multiply when the SL text is in verse, as the language of poetry is densely packed with allusions and other poetic ornaments like metre and figures of speech. The verse form is the most difficult to transfer to another language as the natural rhythm and syllabic patterns of languages differ from each other. How does one translate the majestic sweep of Shakespeare's blank verse into an Indian language? Nobody can deny that the metre and rhythm of the verse add to its grandeur. The sonnet with its stipulations of 14 lines and a specific rhyme scheme is hard to reproduce in a language that is completely different in speech rhythm and metre. In the case of a creative work there is a perfect marriage of form and content; the good translator has to render both adequately. This is perhaps why Robert Frost made the observation that poetry is what gets lost in translation.

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Good Translators

The job of the translator is made easier if the TL reader does not know the SL. Translations of major works of literature can be taken as examples. As far as an Indian reader is concerned, it would be difficult to read Tolstoy or Cervantes or Victor Hugo in the original. But if it is to be well received, the translation cannot appear to be too 'foreign' in style, either. In such cases the translator has to smooth over the linguistic and stylistic peculiarities and make the text accessible to the reader. Here the emphasis is on making the text reader-friendly and hence the translator can take a few liberties in translation.



Constance Garnett

It is precisely because the translator is as important as the writer that they get due recognition in the translation of great works or why great works have more than one translation in the same language. Pablo Neruda's poems were translated into English by Alastair Reid, Pasternak (from Russian to English) by Constance Garnett and Nikos Kazantzakis (from Greek to English) by Peter Bien. Camus's *The Outsider* was later retranslated and published as *The Stranger*. Marcel Proust's French classic was known as *Remembrance of Things Past* to the English-speaking world. This Shakespearean title was its translator C.K.Scott Moncrieff's choice. But the multi-volume book got another title in a recent translation – *In Search of Lost Time* – which is more in keeping with the novel's content. The difference in title is a giveaway of the difference in perspective that the two translators had. Milan Kundera insisted on a retranslation of all his works including his very famous *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, saying that the earlier translations had not done justice to his works. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* was translated again and published in the 400th year of its history. If it had not been for good translators the classics in alien languages would have remained out of bounds for us. Translators remained more or less 'invisible' in olden days as nobody even mentioned them. Fortunately this situation has changed today and the literary world notices translators more; there are even awards given for good translations.

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Interpreters

The third major area where we cannot afford to have distortion of meaning is that of interpretation, or oral translation. Interpreters usually have crucial roles to play as they are made use of in places like the U.N or at top level meetings between world leaders. Very often the peace of a country might hang in the balance and the interpreter has to be very careful about the choice of words and phrasing. S/he has to be an expert in both the cultures that are around the negotiating table. The job is made more difficult as the translation has to be done quickly and spontaneously, without time for thinking or rewording.

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Understanding the Context

What is apparent is that translation is essentially a reader-oriented or listener-oriented activity. The translator has to keep this in mind when translating and this will inform his/her choice of translation method. This also means that the translator has to correctly interpret the context in which the SL text is situated. This is especially true of culture-specific references. For example, translation of the English 'Hi!' into Hindi is a case in point. This can be translated into 'Namaste' and it cannot be faulted as wrong translation. But the casualness of the English greeting is not recreated by the Hindi equivalent. If the greeting is from one friend to another, 'namaste' will not work as it is far too formal for the context. The translator has to understand the reality of the situation and work accordingly.

Susan Bassnett suggests various steps in this context. A translator when faced with a difficult term/phrase, should accept that the SL phrase is untranslatable in the TL at the linguistic level. S/he will have to consider the range of TL terms that are available and decide on the equivalent word on the basis of the socio-cultural context or, if it is a conversation, on the basis of gender and age. When the SL is translated into the TL, what is more important is that the “invariant if it is a conversation core of the SL phrase in its two referential systems (the particular system of the text and the system of culture out of which the text has sprung)” has been reproduced (Bassnett 22). It has often been pointed out that Shakespeare's famous sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day” presents a thorny problem for translators. In the Indian context, summer is not a pleasant time and the comparison to summer will not be taken as a compliment. The translator will have to bear this in mind. If the reader is to understand the nature of the compliment, the translator will have to come up with a cultural equivalent.

Katharina Reiss makes a distinction between 'intentional' and 'unintentional' changes that occur in the process of translation. The unintentional changes take place when the languages have different structures; to a certain extent they are necessary to make the translation intelligible to the reader. Intentional changes occur if the aims of the translator are different from the writer or if the intended reader is not like that of the original. Here the translator will make changes in accordance with his/her readership or his/her purpose. Reiss also points out that a written text might have multiple intentions. A text might inform and entertain at the same time. The translator has to decide as to which intention is the predominating one and translate accordingly. The changes that occur in the TL over the years are also a ground for corresponding changes in the translation. If the SL text is a classic written many years ago the TL with its contemporary usages will

not be able to render it adequately. Here also the translator will be forced to make changes.

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The Three-stage Process

Reiss observes that the translator will have to identify the function of the SL text before deciding on the course of translation. She advises a three-stage process for this, starting from the largest textual unit to the smallest. There are times when these stages will overlap.

The first stage is to read the text as a whole and decide the basic communicative form of the text. If it communicates content, it is the informative type, if it contains artistic content it is the expressive type and if it is of persuasive nature it is the operative type (Venuti, 163). The contexts we have discussed above, viz. notices and technical matter, are of the informative type. We cannot also preclude the possibility of a single text being a mixture of all the types. For example, a newspaper report that is analysing a social problem can be a combination of the informative and persuasive types. It is up to the translator to decide which should be given predominance.

Roman Jakobson has talked about the phatic and poetic functions of texts. The phatic function means the establishment and maintenance of contacts while the poetic function refers to the aesthetic aspects of a text. Reiss disagrees that these two functions can determine the type of text; she believes that both functions are common to all types. Even a technical manual, according to her, has poetic functions as it makes use of language in a certain way. A poem also has a phatic function as it can be seen as communication at a different level.

The second stage in textual analysis is the establishment of text variety. This can be done by identifying certain speech or verbal patterns in the text. For example, the chances are high that a story that begins with “Once upon a time...” is a children's story. The last stage is the analysis of style where the translator's skill will be sorely tested. If the SL writer is somebody who uses an ornate style, the translator will have to be careful to reproduce that effect in the TL.

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Conclusion

These are challenges that a translator faces in the course of translation. Jirí Levý the Czech translation scholar thought that a translator cannot gloss over difficult terms and take an easy way out. He felt that it was the translator's responsibility to overcome hurdles like these and ensure that the SL text is adequately represented. A translator can be pardoned an awkward usage if s/he uses it to clarify the SL text.

All these debates ultimately agree that the translation can be termed successful if it communicates the SL message to the reader. If we can read and understand the instruction in a manual for an equipment made in Japan, then it means that the translator has successfully passed on the SL message to the TL. Similarly if Tolstoy is considered to be a great writer by everybody and not just Russians, obviously the text has been communicated without distortions to the reading public in general. Nida underlines this point when he says “the ultimate purpose of the translation, in terms of its impact upon its intended audience, is a fundamental factor in any evaluation of translations” (Venuti 131).

Assignments

1. How do the purpose and readership of translation influence the method of translation?
2. Select a text of your choice and translate it for young readers. What are the changes you would make?

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