

The Lecture Contains:

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Module 2: Introduction to Translation Studies as a discipline

Lecture 3: The Early Phase of Translation Studies: Issues and Strategies

Introduction

The first two lectures gave you an overview of the evolution of translation as a practice in the west and in India. This lecture introduces you to the theoretical concerns underlying this practice and the strategies that the early translators used in the process. This will help to better understand the evolution of Translation Studies as a discipline and the issues that it is dealing with today.

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How to translate?

Translation is not a mechanical process where you replace one word with another. Anybody who has tried to translate a literary work will know that the first problem s/he faces is: How to translate – literally or figuratively? This is perhaps the first debate that arose in this field and continues even today. Actually we find this issue being discussed by the Romans in ancient west. They believed that poets had a moral duty to their society—of educating people and trying to uplift them by presenting good role models through their work. If necessary they had to translate works from other languages (Greek was the only option before them).

The Romans undertook translations primarily to provide their readers with good literary models. The stress was on 'sense for sense' translations.

In this way they would be enriching their own language and vocabulary as well. Naturally the best way to translate was much debated, especially by Cicero and Horace who were themselves translators and wrote about the process. Cicero was one of the first to articulate the translator's dilemma: "If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth, and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in the order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator."

Both Horace and Cicero did not advocate slavish imitation of the source language (SL) text. In this context it should be remembered that most of the educated Romans knew Greek. So translation from Greek into Latin was not for those who did not know the SL, but for those aesthetes who would appreciate the beauty of the process of transformation into Latin. The stress was on enriching Latin rather than on fidelity to the original Greek. That is why Horace advised the translator to invent new words to add to the vocabulary of his language. The primary responsibility of the translator was to the target language (TL) reader and so there was no need to translate word for word. It was enough if they were able to reproduce the spirit of the original SL work. So in this period we see that a certain license in translation was acceptable.

Translation of the Bible

However, this belief in the translator's freedom disappears when it comes to Bible translations. Translation also means interpretation, and this could become blasphemy (intentionally or unintentionally) in the case of translation of the scriptures. It was believed to be a sin to interfere with the word of God. So the effort was to translate word for word so that the meaning did not get distorted. Perhaps it is with this that the concept of fidelity or absolute rendering of the original came into the practice of translation. But St. Jerome, one of the first translators of the Bible, stated that he had not done a word for word translation. Though his translation was later to become the basis for the accepted Vulgate Bible, other vernacular translators did not fare so well. We have already seen the case of John Wycliffe who had to face the extreme punishment of burning at the stake for his English translation of the Bible.

The concept of fidelity became important for the first time with the vernacular translations of the Bible.

These translations took away the power of knowledge from the clergy and gave it to the common man. So these were not merely linguistic acts, but political acts that had the potential to undermine the power of the church. This becomes very clear in the case of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) in Germany. Considered to be the Father of the Reformation in Europe, Luther ushered in Protestantism. He translated the Bible into common German which could be understood by everybody. But he also insisted on conveying the message of the Bible accurately, and stressed meaning over style when it came to translation. He was concerned more about the TL reader and felt that the translation should cater to the reader. The terms he used for translation – *übersetzen* and *verdeutschen* (Germanize) – are revealing. They tell us a lot about his idea of translation, especially the latter term; basically he was trying to modify the SL text by using TL idiom so that it would appear to be as natural and spontaneous as his/her own mother tongue to a German language reader.

On the whole, translations of the Bible had a different purpose from other purely literary works. Here the intention was to make the Bible accessible and comprehensible to all. Hence the language was simple, but the translation had to be faithful to the original and the message that was conveyed had to be accurate. Another aspect of these translations was that very often they were collaborative efforts that involved a group of people. They expanded the vocabulary of the TL which was frequently a vernacular language in

the early stages of development. King Alfred's efforts at translation exemplify this aspect. Translations thus had a moral and didactic purpose, as different from the classical times when it was seen as part of the study of rhetoric and aesthetics.

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Printing: A Turning Point

The invention of printing brought in a turning point in translation history also. It expanded the readership of literary and non-literary works; naturally more caution was exercised as to what people could read. The freedom of translators also was curtailed a bit by the invention of printing. For the first time there was an attempt to theorise the process of translation. Etienne Dolet's work on translation (*How to Translate well from one Language into Another*: 1540) is a case in point.

In his work, Dolet outlines five principles:

- The translator should understand the SL text and be able to capture its sense
- S/he should be competent in both the SL and TL
- S/he should not be literal in translation
- S/he should use common idiomatic language
- S/he should be able to reproduce the correct tone of the original, by a careful use of words, in the TL text

Dolet's principles reveal a change in attitude to translation. There is a greater emphasis on understanding a text in the SL, for which a translator requires more than literary prowess. Dolet is aware that much more than linguistic differences mark the SL and TL texts. That is why he emphasizes that the translator should be able to capture the tone of the original text where the translator has to be sensitive to the cultural differences too.

We find that Dolet's views are supported by George Chapman in England. In the dedication he has written for the translation of Homer, Chapman states that literal translation should be avoided. But he also cautions that in his/her attempt to capture the essence of the SL, the translator should avoid excessive freedom.

Dolet's and Chapman's views reflect the spirit of their times. They were confident and assertive about their mother tongues. They lived in a Europe that was witnessing sweeping reforms in religious as well as

political spheres. The vernacular translations of the Bible led to the decline of the Catholic Church, paving the way for the rise of Protestantism. Similarly the concept of nation states and pride in nationalities began asserting themselves. Translations that were aimed at enhancing the vernacular were also affirmations of resurgent nationalism. Thomas North was unapologetic about not knowing Latin to translate Plutarch. Without undue reverence for his SL author, North felt confident enough to translate from a secondary source with the English reader in mind.

The translator was expected to capture the spirit of the original without resorting to word for word translation.

We see a similar blasé attitude in Wyatt and Surrey's translations of Petrarch. Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard Earl of Surrey, more popularly known as Wyatt and Surrey, are famous for having brought the sonnet form to England from Italian, especially Petrarch. But their translations are so 'free' that they have been viewed more as 'adaptations'. Susan Bassnett points out that this is an alternative method, which does not involve literal translation but is faithful to the purpose of the SL text. The purpose of the sonnet was to evoke courtly love and that is exactly what Wyatt and Surrey brought into the English language. The English sonnet captures the effect it originally had on the SL reader.

Thus we see that the Renaissance translator had a mind of her own. Her attitude to the SL text and author was not one of subservience or self-effacement. She made use of the text to entertain her TL readers and took liberties with the SL text whenever she wished.

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17th century

The 17th century emphasis on order and reason is reflected in translation also. There was large scale translation of classics. A prominent writer on translation of these times was Sir John Denham. He believed that the writer and translator were on equal footing; the task of the translator was to extract the essence of the SL text and reproduce it with maximum effect in the TL. He believed that the translator could take a few liberties in the process. He was supported in this by his contemporary Abraham Cowley who was also a poet and translator.

But the main figure in this age is that of John Dryden who was an influential critic and poet. He outlined three basic methods of translation:

- Metaphrase: Word for word translation
- Paraphrase: Sense for sense (figurative) translation
- Imitation: This is basically like adaptation where the SL text is set aside and recreated in the TL

The concept of the source language text as 'original' and translation as derivative or secondary takes roots in the 17th – 18th centuries. The translator then became the slave to the master or the writer of the original.

Dryden personally preferred the paraphrase method which was the middle path between the other two. He also had a set of criteria to evaluate the skill of a translator. He believed that only a poet could translate another poet effectively. S/he must be skilled in both languages and be able to understand both SL and TL cultures well. S/he is like a portrait painter who had the duty to reproduce a fairly accurate picture of his/her original. We find the notion of the 'master writer' and 'servant translator' beginning to emerge.

The notion of translator as imitator or painter of a portrait had primacy in the 18th century. The belief was that translator/translation was not 'original'. The translator had a moral duty both to his/her original and also to the reader to capture the spirit of the SL text. Paradoxically for this age, Alexander Pope who translated Homer, believed that a few liberties can be taken in the translation in the attempt to make the TL reader understand the original.

We can discern a shift in perspective now. In the 15th-16th centuries, the translator could undertake translations without even knowing the SL and could treat the SL text a bit flippantly. By the 18th century translator was expected to be an expert in the SL and its culture. Translation was seen as derivative and

secondary and expected to convey the SL text fairly accurately. A person who shared this view was the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He believed in three methods of translation:

- The first ‘acquaints us with foreign countries on our own terms’
- The second is when the translator captures the essence of the original but reproduces it in his/her terms
- The third one makes the SL and TL texts almost similar; the translation will capture the spirit of the original but will have an existence of its own

Goethe was of the view that the last method was the most challenging and the best.

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Translation a secondary activity

Alexander Fraser Tytler, author of *The Principles of Translation* the first book exclusively on translation in English, tried to systematize the process of translation further. He outlined three principles:



Alexander Fraser Tytler

- The translation should recreate the original
- It should resemble the original in style and manner
- It should read easily like the original

What is significant about the Tytler principles is that they do not give much freedom to the translator. The translator is seen as somewhat less than the writer. Moreover, they assume that there is a spirit or essence of a work of art that is reproducible.

The idea of reproducibility was severely contested in the Romantic Age that believed in the primacy of the imaginative faculty. Poetry was divinely inspired and the real meaning of a poem lay between the lines. The Romantics did not really believe that a poem could be translated. Translation was seen as a secondary and derivative activity that did not require the creative originality of writing. However there were others who perceived translation as a means of communication and therefore to be a category of the human thought process.

A notable figure of the century is that of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) who advocated a different language for translation. He wanted word for word translation; he felt that the effect should be one of ‘foreignness’. He was of the view that “the more closely the translation follows the turns taken by the original, the more foreign it will seem to the reader ” (qtd in Venuti, 4). This method was adopted by other translators like William Morris. The Victorians, notably Carlyle and Arnold, and the pre-Raphaelites like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, shared this view. The main drawback of this method was that the translation, because of its ‘foreignness’, alienated the common reader and appealed only to an elite minority. An embodiment of this can be seen in Matthew Arnold’s views on the subject. Arnold advocated an implicit surrender to the SL text without thought for the TL reader. The intention was not to enrich the TL culture, but to bring another work to the reader’s attention.

This attitude is represented by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who translated Dante’s *Divine Comedy* into English. The other extreme is Edward Fitzgerald who translated the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. Longfellow, because of his reverence, aims to carry across the SL text as it is whereas Fitzgerald, because of his condescension towards the ‘inferior’ SL text, decides to uplift it by ‘englishing’ it. Susan Bassnett

terms him “a skilful merchant offering exotic wares to the discerning few.”

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Changing Perceptions

Thus over the years the perceptions of translation and translator have been changing. The major concerns have been and still are, about the autonomy of the text and translator. In the period up to the World War I, Susan Bassnett discerns five broad areas into which translation can be classified:

- Translation as scholarly activity where the SL text is acknowledged to be superior. The translator is subservient to the writer and has a self-effacing role. An example could be the translation of classics like Homer.
- Translation as mediating influence that helps the reader to get acquainted with the SL in the original. The translator is again on an inferior footing, but the translation also tries to mediate between two cultures. Sir William Jones's translation of Kalidasa is an illustration of this.
- Translation, through its foreignness, makes the reader better understand the SL text. This might make the translation difficult to read—William Morris's translation of Homer being an example.
- Translation that reveals the translator's personal choice. Ezra Pound's translation of Chinese poetry reveals his personal preference and nothing else.
- Translation that tries to uplift the SL text that is seen as inferior. Firtzgerald's condescension regarding the Persian text that he was translating is illustrative of this.

These strategies belong to a different age and might not be relevant today. But translation theory and studies are largely concerned about more or less the same issues. Today we see what is called the 'cultural turn' in translation studies where the issues from other disciplines are also sources of debate.



Assignments

1. How have the central concerns of translation practice evolved with the centuries?
2. Evaluate the respective merits and demerits of literal and figurative translation.

References

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