

## Module 10: Translation Today

### Lecture 36: Mediating between Two Languages

#### The Lecture Contains:

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#### Introduction

The lectures so far have focused only on written texts, but translation can be done orally also. Just think of how many times we have to orally translate for ourselves in our daily lives – a film in another language, a sign board or a friend who is not fluent in our language. Don't we translate? One of our ministers in the central cabinet was asked to explain his lengthy absence from the Lok Sabha. His answer was that he could barely understand the parliamentary proceedings as they were conducted in Hindi or English. He knew neither language. Nobody could insist that he learn English which is not an Indian language. He could not be asked to learn Hindi either, as it is not easy to master a new language and acquire the fluency to conduct state affairs in it. There was no recourse but to provide him with translation of the parliamentary proceedings, or in other words to provide him with an interpreter.

Interpreter is a mediator, a link between two different languages that cannot understand each other.

The minister's predicament is representative of many citizens of the world today. The world has shrunk and brought us all closer, but the number of languages that separate us remain the same. As we travel around the world and meet other people, it becomes important to understand each other. But the world today increasingly resembles the tower of Babel where people attempt to communicate with each other in mutually incomprehensible languages. In this context, the role of interpreters or oral translators of oral language, have a very important role to play. They are in huge demand in very formal settings like political meetings between heads of state or high power business meetings in corporate boardrooms. They are also very useful for tourists who are visiting a totally unfamiliar country in terms of language and culture. However, they are like the invisible translators, rarely acknowledged for their help in negotiations or business deals. If two countries like US and North Korea were to have political meetings to sort out differences, think about how crucial the role of the interpreter, who acts as the mediator, will be!

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#### Oral Translation

As you can see, interpreting is nothing but translation that is oral and not written. However, Daniel Gile notes how there are people who argue that there is absolutely no common ground between translation and interpreting (41). We can identify certain dissimilarities which are mainly in the way in which the activity is carried out in both systems:

- a)** The translator has to be strong in writing skills whereas the interpreter needs speaking skills. In fact, the interpreter should develop what Gile describes as a good ‘microphone personality’ (41). They have to learn how to use their voice effectively.
- b)** Interpreters have to be constantly on their toes as they do not have time to refer to other sources of knowledge. Any information that they need has to be acquired beforehand. The translator of a written text is more relaxed in this respect.
- c)** Decision making in interpreting has to be done in a split second, whereas translators have more time for this.

Interpreting is oral translation – an activity that is similar to written translation, but very dissimilar too.

The translator of a written text has time on her side, as she can choose what to translate, how to translate and when to deliver the final translation. All of these are luxuries for the interpreter. The interpreter works against time, and what is most important is that she never gets the time to polish her translation. One word that is mistranslated can spell disaster not just for the interpreter, but for the act of dialogue that she is translating. She also has to have highly developed listening skills, as she is always listening along with the person whom she is translating for.

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## Conference Interpreting

The presence of an interpreter during the meeting of two powerful individuals / groups who do not know each other's languages is actually not a modern phenomenon. This goes way back into history. Think of all the foreign invasions ancient India had had, starting with the Aryan one to Alexander and the Mughals. Language must have been an issue. However, the role of the interpreter was formally acknowledged in the west with the World War I. Till then, French was the language for international meetings, but a few British and American people who attended the post-war negotiations did not know French. So they needed to have somebody who knew both languages. Interpreters became very necessary after the World War II also, especially for the Nuremberg trials where the Nazi criminals who were on trial, knew only German. So, conference interpreting is not really a practice that takes place only at conference venues; today it takes place in situations outside high level state meetings, like classroom lectures. The interpreter here acts as the link, the person who listens to the speech in a particular language and translates it immediately for the speaker of another language.

Interpreters have played a crucial role in history.

The translation/interpretation can be done in three ways – consecutive, simultaneous and whispered (Daniel Gile, 41). In consecutive interpreting, the interpreter listens to the speech for a while, makes notes, and then translates that segment of speech for the benefit of the listener. You must have seen this process with the speeches made by our political leaders. For instance, our leaders who know only Hindi make use of interpreters when they address political rallies in Kerala or Tamil Nadu where the public cannot follow the language. Simultaneous interpreting takes place usually in conference settings. Here the interpreter sits in a booth, listens to the speech and translates simultaneously. The listener listens to this translated version through a headset. This is a common sight at UN meetings where speeches are made in most languages of the world. Whispered interpretation is when the interpreter is physically present beside the delegate and does simultaneous interpreting, by whispering the translation to the delegate while the speech is being made.

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## Issues in Interpreting

Interpreting, especially simultaneous interpreting, is no easy task. So most of the theoretical studies about interpreting has focused on simultaneous interpreting rather than the consecutive one. What actually happens in the process of simultaneous interpreting is a complex cognitive action. The interpreter listens to a speech, understands it and translates – all of this can happen only consecutively, but it gives the impression of being simultaneous. The scientific studies into the process have attempted to understand the mental activities that take place during simultaneous interpreting.

Interpreting or oral translation is a complex cognitive process.

For example, how do interpreters comprehend a sentence when they hear it? There are scientists who contend that there is basically no difference in the process of comprehension in interpreting from that of comprehension in daily life. But the major difference is the speed with which the interpreter has to produce the translation. How then does the interpreter comprehend a sentence when she hears it? The simultaneous interpreter has to start translating at the same instant that the speaker starts speaking. Very often the interpreter has no means to understand beforehand the idea that the speaker is trying to convey. The other problem is that the interpreter might not have an in-depth knowledge of the subject that the speech is about. In most cases, the interpreter would know less about the subject than the speaker and this makes it all the more difficult for the interpreter to anticipate the speaker and her words. Theoreticians in the area of psycholinguistics are interested in this aspect of interpreting.

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## Signed language interpreting

Another form of translation or interpreting is from speech to signed language. Signed language is a form of communication that has been specially developed for people with hearing disability, and consists of signs made using the hands. One sign represents a word of the language that it is representing. In a way, signed language can also be considered the language of translation as it is ‘translating’ a word of a language like English into a form of visual language. Contrary to popular perception, there is no universal signed language. There are many signed languages and even those that are based on the same language are not the same. For example, American Signed Language (ASL) is different from British Sign Language (BSL), although both countries have English as the first language. The practitioners of these languages will not be able to understand each other. As is the case with languages like Hindi or English, these signed languages also have definite grammatical structure and semantic rules.

Signed language is the language of translation, from a verbal language to a visual language.

However, English and a signed language like BSL do not have the same grammatical rules. Signed languages are completely different from languages like English. The situation becomes more complicated when there are people with hearing disabilities whose native language is not ASL or BSL. William Isham notes: “Instead, they have learned one variation of a class of signed systems generically known as ‘signed English’. Vocabulary adopted and adapted from ASL is used to convey English words and delivered in English word order” (232-33). These people with signed English as their native language will need interpreters who are basically transliterators. They are so called because what they basically do is but encode English words or “transliterate English to and from a spoken and signed form” (233). Isham observes that the term interpreter can be given to those who, for example, work between ASL and English in the American context.

Signed language interpreters or transliterators are in demand wherever the hearing-impaired people need them. Our national television channel Doordarshan has a special news bulletin for the hearing-impaired where a news reader first reads the news, and an interpreter uses signed language to translate that. What takes place here is consecutive interpreting. This news bulletin first highlighted the cause of the hearing-impaired in India and the profession of signed language interpreters.

## Court Interpreting

The courtroom is another important site that requires the presence of interpreters. The courtroom is but a symbol of all the places where you might need legal assistance, like the lawyer's office or police station. It is very important especially for the accused to understand the proceedings of the law. Suppose the accused is an Indian maid in the Middle East, who cannot understand or speak Arabic. She would not be in the know of things, least of all comprehend the complexities of the law. An interpreter would be necessary to explain all this to her. Moreover, if she is testifying in a court of law, she would have to answer both defence and prosecution lawyers satisfactorily.

Interpreters help to explain legal proceedings, especially in foreign countries.

Muhammad Gamal points out that court interpreting rose to prominence in the west with the Nuremberg trials that tried Nazi war criminals. Like other forms of interpreting, this too makes use of various strategies of interpreting like the consecutive and simultaneous. However it is different: "Irrespective of the range of techniques it uses, what most distinguishes court interpreting from other forms of interpreting is its close attention to ethical issues which arise out of the function of the courtroom" (53). Interpreters play a crucial role especially with court testimony. The interpreters will have to translate not just the words and sentences, but also the fumbles, slight pauses, and stutters of the witness or accused because these paralinguistic features might provide crucial insights into the character of the person deposing in the court.

The European Convention on Human Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights have acknowledged the right to an interpreter in court as a legal right. However, this has not become a law even in most countries of the west. India does provide for interpreters in court. For instance, Muhammed Ajmal Kasab the Pakistani terrorist accused in the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, was provided with an Urdu interpreter after he complained that he could not follow court proceedings in English. The judge did not know Urdu either. So the services of an interpreter were called for.

Interpreting is another area of translation that has not been adequately studied by translation theorists.



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**Communication in the field of sports**

The new feature of group sports items like football and cricket is the formation of premier league teams that do not form teams on the basis of nationality. For instance, take the case of the Indian Premier League (IPL) teams in cricket. We have numerous teams like Kolkata Knight Riders, Rajasthan Royals, Chennai Superkings etc which have players from all around the cricketing world. A single team will consist of Indians, Pakistanis, South Africans, Caribbeans, Australians etc. How do these players communicate with each other? Not all of them would necessarily know English. Chances are that they will have a coach who does not share the language of most of his team members. Or think of a football team like Real Madrid. The coach Jose Mourinho is Portuguese and does not know Spanish while most of his players are from Spain or native speakers of Spanish. Miscommunication between players of opposing teams or among players of the same team can have disastrous consequences. The infamous red card given to Zinedine Zidane in the world cup final between France and Italy is an example. Zidane reacted violently to an insult from the Italian player Simeone who perhaps did not realize the enormity of what he was saying. The consequence was the ousting of Zidane causing the weakening of the French team and its subsequent defeat in the finals. It is absolutely imperative to have cooperation and total communication between members of a team, for which understanding each other's language is a must.

One team or many teams within the same group?  
Multilingualism is the feature of most premier league teams like those in the IPL .

It is not possible or practical to have interpreters on the sports field. But teams have tried to come up with a form of signed language that would unify team members and ensure that no miscommunication occurs to hinder the communication between players. Many teams of the IPL have come up with a language like this. It also helps that the language of the referee on the football field or the umpire on the cricket ground is a sort of universal sign language which needs no translation.

All these areas of translation are yet to be studied seriously by translation theorists.

**Assignments**

1. What are the various forms of interpreting? What are the challenges faced only by the interpreters and not translators in general?
2. Listen to a speech and attempt interpretation, either simultaneous or consecutive. Note down the difficulties you faced and try to think of strategies to overcome them.



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