Module 4: Theories of translation

Lecture 14: Indian Translation Theory

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Introduction

We have already seen that we cannot claim to have an indigenous translation theory, although translation as a practice was not unheard of. We have also noted how it was quite common for the people to switch from one dialect to the other or from one language to the other, in the course of everyday speech or literary texts. The epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were reproduced in other Indian languages. It has to be remembered that this was largely an oral tradition, and translation meant transcreation rather than faithful rendering of meanings. In fact, 'transcreation' is the term that P. Lal, who was a translator of the Indian epics, likes to use for his translations. Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre in the introduction to their book *Changing the Terms* make a distinction between the western tradition of translation and the Indian tradition. They maintain that the Indian tradition "is essentially oral, involves a much looser notion of the text, interacts intensely with local forms of narrative and is a revigorating and positive global influence" (10). They draw upon a speech by Amitav Ghosh who points out how the *Panchatantra* passed into Arabic through a Persian translation, giving birth to *The Thousand and One Nights* . This in turn passed on to the Slavic languages through Greek, from Hebrew into Latin and from there to German and Italian. Thus they have had countless metamorphoses, the main ones being the fables of La Fontaine and the tales of the Grimm brothers. This was more or less how translation worked in the Indian tradition. A story that was out in the public domain could be chosen and worked upon to produce something that was not quite the original. That is why translation is called a transcreation rather than anything else.

Translation in the Indian context was more of transcreation or retelling done by the translator in her/his style.

India does not have an organized body of translation theory or what we can call translation theorists, but there are a few people who have written extensively on the subject. Let us look at a few of them.

Aurobindo's Theory of Translation

Aurobindo (1892 – 1950) was a philosopher, poet and also a gifted translator. He had a completely British upbringing and education before he was attracted to the nationalist movement. He was equally proficient in English and Indian (Sanskrit and Bengali) language and literature. He has translated the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita as well as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* into English. His theory of translation stems from this experience of translating Indian works into English, as is indicated by the names of those essays: "On Translating Kalidasa", "On Translating the Bhagavad Gita", "On Translating the Upanishads", "Freedom in Translation", "Importance of Turn of Language in Translation", "Translation of Prose into Poetry" and "Remarks on Bengali Translations".

Being a philosopher, Aurobindo was greatly influenced by the cognitive philosophy of ancient India. According to him, translation is a process that involves multiple steps. The translator reads, analyses, and interprets the text. This means that he has to understand the textual nuances before arriving at a suitable equivalent in the target language. This shows that translation is a cognitive process. According to Aurobindo, the human consciousness that operates behind this cognitive process has three levels – *nama* (name), *rupa* (form of meaning) and *swarupa* (essential figure of truth). Gopinathan points out that these three levels are analogous to the three levels of language mentioned by Bhartrhari in his *Vakyapadiyam.* They are *vaikhari* (spoken level of language), *madhyama* (intermediate level between articulation and conception) and *pasyanti* (the highest level where a thought is at its nebulous stage). Gopinathan argues that Aurobindo develops his concept from these levels and "gives a further psycho-spiritual division of the levels of consciousness at the physical, mental and supra mental levels" (8). The text has to be grasped intuitively at the highest level of *swarupa* before it can be translated at the other two levels of *nama* and *rupa,* or the level of text and meaning. Therefore in translation, "the process of text analysis, comprehension of the literal as well as the suggested meaning, and the process of decision making will also have three levels" (9). There is a constant shifting of these levels in the process of translation. Gopinathan argues that the decision making process in translation starts from the highest level of *swarupa* . Aurobindo felt that "translation becomes more communicative, especially when the higher meaning of the text is significant" (10).

Aurobindo conceptualized translation as a cognitive process that involved three levels of consciousness – nama (name), rupa (form) and swarupa (essential figure of truth).

On Translation

Aurobindo himself says that even after the translator has decided on the right form for his text, "…there will naturally be no success unless the mind of the translator has sufficient kinship, sufficient points of spiritual and emotional contact and a sufficient basis of common poetical powers not only to enter into but to render the spiritual temperament and the mood of that temperament…" ("On Translating Kalidasa"). This is calling for a metaphysical communion between the translator and the author, and functions at a much higher level than the reading and understanding of a text at its denotative and connotative levels. He discusses at length the problems he encountered in the translation of Kalidasa, the major one being that of the metre into which he could translate.

After that he brings up the question of fidelity. Like countless translators before and after him, Aurobindo talks about the dilemma he faced as to the choice between a literal translation and something that might appear to be a new work under the cloak of translation. He observes that "…rigid rules are out of place" here. It is the purpose of the translation that should determine the strategy. If the aim is to "acquaint foreign peoples" with the ideas and themes of the writer, literal translation is alright. But the translator can draw upon her/his creative powers in re-rendering the original work if his/her aim is to recapture the spirit of the original for the benefit of the target readers. Aurobindo points out that the ideal of a translation is different from both: "The translator seeks first to place the mind of the reader in the same spiritual atmosphere as the original; he seeks next to produce in him the same emotions and the same kind of poetical delight and aesthetic gratification and lastly he seeks to convey to him the thought of the poet and substance in such words as will create, as far as may be, the same or a similar train of associations, the same pictures or the same sensuous impressions" ("On Translating Kalidasa").

> According to Aurobindo, translation strategy is determined by the purpose of translation, and the nature of the target readership. It is important for the translator to be on the same wavelength as the author.

He admits that this is but an ideal to which a translator can perhaps only aspire, but this is the ideal that s/he should yearn to reach. The translator should try to tone down the alien quality of the text for the benefit of the target reader. For instance, he cites an example from Kalidasa's *Meghadutam,* where a huge dark cloud is compared to "the dark foot of Vishnu lifted in impetuous act to quell Bali". The translator has to keep in mind that a non-native reader would not be aware of the story behind this at all. So Aurobindo translated it as: "Dark like the cloudy foot of highest God/ When starting from the dwarf shape world-immense / With Titan-quelling step through heaven he strode". Aurobindo admits that this is more

paraphrase than translation, but this has to be accepted if the translator has to communicate the spirit of the original to the reader. He points out that the differing world views of two distinct cultures pose a problem to the translator's job. He observes how the Hindu (Indian) mind has the tendency to "seize on what is pleasing and beautiful in all things and even to see a charm where the English mind sees a deformity and to extract poetry and grace out of the ugly" ("On Translating Kalidasa"). Aurobindo wants the translator to take all these differences into cognizance before embarking on a translation.

Translation of Tagore

Since Aurobindo, there have been only very few Indians writing about art and aesthetics in the English language, though criticism is a very strong component of our regional literatures. Rabindranath Tagore was a poet and translator, and his *Gitanjali* , for which he got the Nobel Prize, was translated by Tagore himself. But his poems and stories were also translated by others, often under his supervision. He has explained why he translated *Gitanjali* into English: "I simply felt an urge to recapture, through the medium of another language, the feeling and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in past days" and that "I was making fresh acquaintance with my own heart by dressing it in other clothes" (qtd in Sujit Mukherjee: 104). Sujit Mukherjee points out that "these are not the normal stances of a translator" and that we can detect a "…note of uncertainty, almost a tone of apology, as if he knew that what he was doing was not quite valid in literary terms" (104). Mukherjee observes how the Bangla *Gitanjali* is not considered by Bengali readers as the best of Tagore's works. The English *Gitanjali* has only a portion of the Bangla original and has parts from other Bangla works *Naivedya*, *Kheya* and *Gitimalya* . Tagore was basically catering to the tastes of his English readers who avidly took in the devotional or mystic aspects of his poetry. Although this was a deliberate act by Tagore himself, this was misrepresentation because this translation highlighted some aspects of his creative work and downplayed certain others. This resulted in the creation of two different images of Tagore in Bangla and Tagore in English translation. This is what prompts Sujit Mukherjee to term Tagore's translation this as "perjury" – "the act of knowingly making a false statement on a matter material to the issue in question" (124). Tagore and his English translations have been the subject of many studies by others as well, focusing on this aspect. Mary Lago points to the perils of such translation when she writes about the legacy of Tagore: "If younger readers recognize his name, it summons up, more often than not, impressions of a stereotyped mystical man from the East; they have still too few means of discovering all the power and beauty that, in the passage from Bengali to English, went astray" (421). This shows how important the translations were in the making of Tagore the man and the author.

> Tagore translated many of his works into English. However, they differ so much from their Bangla originals that critics have pointed out that Tagore in Bangla and Tagore in English translations are two different poets.

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A. K. Ramanujan's theory of translation

A. K. Ramanujan is a translator who helped foreign readers to appreciate the beauty of ancient Indian texts other than the Sanskrit ones. As Vinay Dharwadker points out, his translations included classical and *bhakti* poetry in Tamil, Virasaiva *vacanas* (poetic aphorisms) in Kannada, *bhakti* and court literature in Telugu, folktales and women's oral narratives written in the 19th century, and the poetry and prose of India after independence ("A. K. Ramanujan's Theory and Practice of Translation": 114). As a translator Ramanujan was well aware of his responsibilities of having to convey the original to the target reader and also of having to strike a balance between the author's interest and his own interest. His task was made all the more difficult when it came to the translation of ancient Tamil or Kannada poetry into English, because there were differences in culture, language and temporal framework between the source and target languages.

In his effort to achieve the closest approximation to the original, Ramanujan concentrated on various principles of poetic organization. Here he tried to make a distinction between the 'inner poetic core' and the 'outer core' of a poem. He focused on the images and their arrangement in the original poem, and sought to reproduce that arrangement in his translation by a visual pattern, usually made by the ordering of stanzas on the page. Dharwadker quotes Ramanujan as saying that he made "explicit typographical approximations to what [he] thought was the inner form of the poem" (117). He feels that Ramanujan developed his ideas of outer and inner poetic forms from two different sources – Noam Chomsky and Roman Jakobson. What Dharwadker has in mind are Chomsky's concept of deep structure and surface structure, and Jakobson's distinction between 'verse instance' and 'verse design'. He also finds similarities between this and Julia Kristeva's distinction between 'phenotext' (the manifest text) and 'genotext' (the innate signifying structure). Ramanujan also drew upon the Tamil Sangam distinction of 'akam' and 'puram' poetry, representing the exterior world and the inner world of emotions respectively. He felt that English and his disciplines of linguistics and anthropology give him his outer form while personal and professional concerns with Tamil, Kannada and other Indian folklore form his inner self. As a translator, these two forms had to be in dialogue with each other.

The Author – Translator relationship

Problems of cultural and linguistic incommensurability create barriers to translation. Besides this is the relationship between the author and translator which Ramanujan saw as essentially conflict-ridden. The translator might wish to create a poem out of the original but has to bow to the reader's wish for a literal translation; or the translator might want to create a poem of his own from the original which is in conflict with the reader's desire to see a replication of the original. The translator is thus caught between "transmission and expression". But Ramanujan says that a translator is "an artist on oath …caught between the need to express himself and the need to represent another, moving between the two halves of one brain, he has to use both to get close to 'the originals'" (120).

The reader is also important in this process. The reader of a translated poem expects the translation to be a reliable representation of the original text in terms of language and structure as well as its various cultural connotations. It also has to provide aesthetic pleasure. These are demands that can be met by various translation strategies at the translator's disposal, but how can he convey the vast network of cultural relationships? Dharwadker points out that Ramanjuan "argued that even as a translator carries over a particular text from one culture into another, he has to translate the reader from the second culture into the first one" (121). He thought this can be achieved through notes and prefaces written by the translator. His extensive commentaries that are the prefaces to his translations of Sangam poetry or Kannada vacanas are in fact the core of Ramanujan's translation theory. He notes in his Translator's Note to U. R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel Samskara:"A translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one. The Notes and Afterword in this book are part of that effort" (122).

> A translator should translate not only the text, but the target reader also into another culture. Translator's introductions and notes help to achieve this.

By acquainting the foreign reader with the cultural context of a different language, Ramanujan was also focusing on the vast intertextual network of which that text was only a part. The ancient poets had no idea that they would be read centuries later in languages and cultures unknown to them. But through translations and renditions in other art forms like dance, they become the living tradition of modern Tamil culture. Thus the translation of a Tamil poem of four lines "evolves into an open-ended, multi-track process, in which translator, author, poem and reader move back and forth between two different sets of languages, cultures, historical situations and traditions" (Dharwadker 123). Translation then becomes a

process of cultural transmission that energises everybody concerned.

Vinay Dharwadker who is himself a poet and translator synthesizes Ramanujan's principles with his own to come up with a guideline for translations in India .

Ten Principles of Translation

In an analysis of the challenges that Indian literature in its translated form has to face in a globalized market, Vinay Dharwadker comes up with ten principles ("Translating the Millennium: Indian Literature in a Global Market"). He says that the ten principles for translation would ensure better translations that can represent Indian literature confidently in the world market.

1. The translations should be of a quality that can stand the test of the world market. They have to be translated into "international standard English" and not Indian English, and should have prefaces, introductions and glossaries etc that would help the non-native reader.

2. The translation should be reliable. Dharwadker prefers the bhashantara (which is more in keeping with Dryden's concept of metaphrase) rather than rupantara (change of form) or anukarana (imitation or mimicry of original). The bhashantara would be more like a 'chhaya' or shadow of the original, a rendering of the text in another language.

3. It is better to translate 'phrase-to-phrase' rather than 'word-to-word'. A literal translation would make the text very awkward, especially if the translation is between two radically different languages like English and Tamil. Moreover, the sentence is considered the basic unit of meaning even according to ancient Sanskrit aesthetic and grammar rules.

4. The relation between a translation and its original is not of complete equivalence (or word-to-word equivalence) but parallelism. It is often very difficult to translate a word in an Indian language into a word in English; sometimes it might require a group of words or a sentence to convey the meaning.

5. The translation has to convey the original diction, style, voice and tone accurately. Diction means not only the choice and arrangement of words, but also whether the style is high, middle or low. A pompous high diction might not work with contemporary readers even for the translation of epics; Dharwadker advises the middle path. It is up to the translator to capture the effect of the author's style in the translation, like Gregory Rabassa has done for Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The voice and tone are also important. Dharwadker says that the major defect of Tagore translations is that they are atonal.

6. The translation should convey the inner logic of the original. By inner logic is meant the level of meaning that exists beneath the surface of the original. In Sanskrit aesthetic terms it would be bhavartha (implied meaning) and dhvani.

7. A translation of a poem has to be a poem. This is not a simplistic statement, but an observation that reiterates the importance of rendering a poem not just in letter and form but also in spirit. As Paul Valery puts it, the translation has to reproduce the effect of the original on its readers.

8. The reader also has to be 'translated', besides the text. This can be done with the help of notes and translator's prefaces. The text and reader are caught in a double movement, ending up in languages and cultures that are alien to them. The translation has to bridge the divide of cultures, languages and years between the text and the reader.

9. The translation is not just a window or door to another world, but also a mirror which reflects our image. It shows how we appear to the external world by showing us how our literature functions in another language. Like the mirror, it should show up our advantages as well as disadvantages.

10. One text can have multiple translations as there are different ways to conceptualize a text. Dharwadker says that it is imperative that our texts, especially our epics, have multiple translations so that they can be revealed in all the complexity of nuances.

Dharwadker has come up with a guideline for translators and this is very clearly written to help the translator meet the challenges of the marketplace. But they are also pointers to translation as it is practiced in India , with its shortcomings and other problems.

Module 4: Theories of translation

Lecture 14: Indian Translation Theory

Assignments

1. Do you think that Dharwadker's principles will ensure better translations of Indian language works? Can you think of other areas that need to be addressed?

2. The problem with Indians like Aurobindo and Ramanujan is that they emphasize the metaphysical and abstract aspects like intuition and inner logic. Discuss.

3. Read up more on Chomsky's concept of deep and surface structures, Jakobson's verse instance and verse design, and Kristeva's phenotext and genotext. How are they similar to Ramanujan's concept?

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