

Course Name Introduction to
Translation Studies

Department Humanities and
Social Sciences, IIT
Kanpur

Instructor Prof. Mini Chandran



Next 

The Lecture Contains:

-  [Introduction](#)
-  [Evolution of translation in the west](#)
-  [The Bible](#)
-  [Standardization of English](#)
-  [The Elizabethan Age](#)
-  [Europe](#)
-  [Seventeenth Century](#)
-  [Translator as Imitator](#)
-  [The Romantic Age](#)
-  [The Nineteenth Century](#)
-  [Colonial England](#)
-  [Twentieth Century to the Present](#)

 **Previous** **Next** 

Introduction:

Translation has traditionally been seen as a language-oriented exercise by which we transfer texts in one language into another. However, with the formal advent of a field of study called **Translation Studies**, it has expanded to accommodate various processes that do not strictly belong to the linguistic realm. So in the course we will be looking at translation not only as a linguistic activity, but also as a socio-cultural exchange .



This web course consists of 40 lectures divided into eleven modules. Most texts on Translation studies deal with western translation theory, a lack which this course has tried to remedy by including issues which are pertinent to translation in India. It begins with an overview of the history of translation in the west and India, and traces the evolution of Translation Studies as a discipline. The course progresses through general issues and theories of translation and then focuses on postcolonial translation which is a major concern in India. It then proceeds to the cultural turn in translation studies which has ushered in the contemporary view of translation as an activity which has socio-cultural implications. The last modules deal with the role of the translator, different forms of translation, the challenges faced by translation in the present globalized world, and the future of translation as an activity and as a discipline.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Evolution of Translation in the West

What is the place of translations in a given literature or culture? The literature and culture of any region is not a monolith; rather, it is more like a patchwork quilt that is a composite of influences from various places. So translations from foreign languages play a very important part in the formation and shaping of any literature or culture because it is through translations that a given society gets to know of the world outside, of its feelings and thoughts. Thus translations become a window to the world, helping them to assimilate those sights and sounds while developing a culture of their own. We start with a history of translation in the west, by which we mean primarily the English speaking, Anglo-American world. The Greco-Roman world was the major influence on the literatures of these countries and so it is befitting to start with them.

We can not speak of translations in ancient Greece as Greek was the only classical language that they knew of. But on the basis of pure conjecture, they must have translated ancient Indian and Arabic works into their language. Studies have shown the influence of Vedic thought on Greek philosophy. It is also said that Vedic mathematics came to Greece via Arabia. But it is difficult to pinpoint exact texts and translations here. For that we need to go to ancient Rome. As far as Rome was concerned, Greece was the ideal when it came to literature and culture. They looked up to Greek works as role models and unsurprisingly a lot of Greek works were translated into Latin. In fact, Quintilian a 1st century Roman rhetorician, in his work *Institutio Oratoria* emphasized the importance of translation in a young man's education. To develop the skill of rhetoric, he advised young men to analyse and paraphrase the texts that they read. In this context, he strongly recommended translation of Greek texts into Latin to develop their linguistic and oratorical skills.

But two of the first people to comment on translation were Cicero and Horace. Cicero was a Roman philosopher and statesman who translated Greek philosophical works into Latin. He can also be considered one of the first theoreticians of the practice as he has commented on the way works should be translated. He was of the view that translations should capture the essence of the original; so rather than 'word for word' translation it was better to go in for 'sense for sense' rendering.



The other major figure is that of Horace, the great Roman poet. He is primarily known for his poem "Ars

Poetica” or “The Art of Poetry” in which he talks about the rules of poetic composition. Horace was also a translator. But translation was a means of enriching his own language and literature, as far as he was concerned. He too, like Cicero, did not believe in exact rendering of words into the other language. He was all for borrowing words from the original, thereby coining new words in his own language. Translation was a rich source which fed and replenished a language that was finding its feet.



It is quite clear from this that the Romans did not believe in exact translations. They did not have a master-slave relationship with their original where it was expected to stick rigidly to each and every word of the master or original text. One of the reasons why the Romans could take such liberties was that most of the educated Romans were bilingual. So, translations were not just introductions to a foreign text, but also a means to highlight aspects of language and creativity.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 1: Introduction to the practice of translation

Lecture 1: History of Translation in the West

The Bible

Now we pass on to another work that has been perhaps translated into countless languages—the Bible. The Bible was originally in Hebrew, the language of the Jews. As Christianity flourished and spread, it became necessary to translate the Bible also into the language of the region. It was not as if everybody was convinced that the Bible should be translated. In fact there were sections of the clergy who believed that it was a sin to translate the word of God into what they believed to be inferior languages. The translations of the Bible into various languages also helped in the evolution and standardization of those languages.

One of the early translations of the Bible was into Latin when Rome came under the influence of Christianity. We do not know today who those ancient translators were. In 382 CE Pope Damasus entrusted the revision of these versions to St. Jerome, a saint of the Catholic church. Jerome revised the Latin versions and translated parts of the Greek Bible into Latin. He also claimed to have translated parts of the Hebrew Bible. However its authenticity has been questioned because St. Jerome knew very little Hebrew. The revisions of Jerome and his translations became a part of the Bible that later came to be known popularly as the Vulgate, the definitive Latin Bible officially accepted by the Catholic church.



Translations of the Bible were to pave the way for the development of English as a language. After the end of the Roman age, England was a land split up into small kingdoms like Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex etc. Christianity came to England through the Romans. However the Bible came to be translated only much later, when England began to think of herself as a nation that could stand on her own feet. This happened in medieval times. The English translation was done in defiance of the clergy who believed that the right to understand and interpret the Bible rested only with them. So the early translators were thought of as heretics and were persecuted by the church.

One of the early translators of the Bible into English was John Wycliffe. Wycliffe believed that the Bible should be able to communicate with the ordinary uneducated person. He had a band of followers called the Lollards. Latin, in which the Bible was available in England, was known only to the clergy. So Wycliffe decided to translate the Bible into English the common man's language. Wycliffe's Bible was therefore written in simple English so that it could be understood by all. It was published in 1382.

There were other translations that became very important for the language. William Tyndale was a major figure. He translated the Bible from Greek and published it in 1526. He had to suffer for this, and he was

burnt at the stake as punishment for making the Bible available in English. Miles Coverdale is also significant as he was the first to translate and publish the complete Bible in English. These streams of translations later joined to produce the Authorized Version of the Bible or the King James Bible of 1611. These translations strengthened the English language and weakened the position of Latin as a superior language.

This does not mean that the Bible was translated only into English; other European languages like Dutch, German, Swedish and Danish also got their own Bibles. As with the case of English, these translations also helped to standardize these languages. The 1522 German translation of Martin Luther became an important building block for standard German.

 **Previous** **Next** 

Standardization of English

Besides these religious exercises, secular translations also helped in the formation and standardization of the English language. One of the major figures in this was King Alfred the Great of Wessex. Alfred is primarily remembered for upholding the pride of Anglo-Saxons and resisting the attacks of the invading Viking tribes. After consolidating his triumphs and establishing a stable kingdom, Alfred set about to build up the culture of his country. He realized that his kingdom did not have much to boast about in terms of literature. So he launched a project of translations of classical works into English or old English as it was known. These translations had a specific mission – to educate the uncouth people in morals and ethics and to familiarize them with the best of culture in other languages. Alfred himself was a translator, and the chief of his works were the Roman Christian philosopher Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy* and St. Augustine's *Soliloquies*. These works were didactic in nature and acted like hand books in moral philosophy. Alfred's translations and those he commissioned helped in the evolution of English. They also instilled the pride of Englishness and the English language in his people, which became more concrete later during the Elizabethan age.

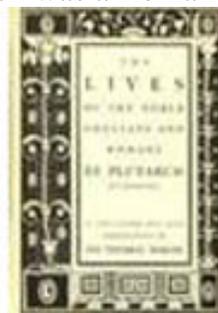


◀ Previous Next ▶

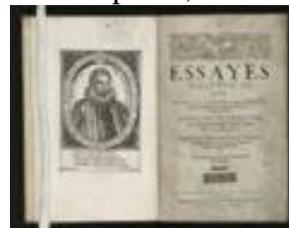
The Elizabethan Age

Jumping a few centuries, we come to the Elizabethan age that played a significant part in the development of English as a language and also became the nursery of a great literature. 16th century England and in fact all of Europe saw many sea voyages being undertaken to parts of the globe that were hitherto unknown. This curiosity in the geographical world had its cultural counterpart too. Translations from other languages into English became more popular and they spoke of strange shores and stranger customs. It should be noted that these translations were undertaken rather casually without much concern about fidelity to the original. They were done in a spirit of adventure that characterizes the voyages of the time. They opened up the Elizabethan mind to different literatures and languages. Most of these translators did not know the original language in which the text was written. The translations were mostly from another translation of the original, with the result that they were more of recreations of the original.

For example, there is Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579). North did not know Latin and translated Plutarch from French. Plutarch was a Roman historian who had written biographies of famous Greek and Roman men. This was also history, in a sense and became an important source book for Shakespeare when he wrote his history plays like *Julius Caesar*. Philemon Holland, a clergyman of the 16th century, also translated Plutarch, mainly his work called *Moralia*. It is said that his translation is better than most 20th century translations of the same work. His translation of Livy's *History of Rome* is another major work of translation of the same age. It helped writers with no knowledge of Latin to get acquainted with the great figures in Roman history and also provided them with raw material for their work. What characterizes Holland's translation is his own stamp that he gave to the texts that he translated, so much so that it became an altogether different text.



John Florio is another translator that we cannot ignore, for it is through him that we have got the greatest essayist of English language, Sir Francis Bacon. Florio, a contemporary and friend of Shakespeare, translated the French essayist Montaigne into English. It is said that Bacon was influenced by this and was inspired to write his famous essays. Florio translated from French, Italian and Spanish and is considered to be one of the most gifted translators in English. He is believed to have contributed more than thousand words to the language. In fact, he was such a gifted writer that there are people who believe that he is actually Shakespeare and wrote all those wonderful plays.



George Chapman, an Elizabethan poet and writer, also translated Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into English. This was the first complete English translation of Homer and ran into volumes. Chapman's translation

stood the test of time because centuries later the Romantic poet John Keats was to write a sonnet on the emotions he felt on first reading the Chapman's translation of the Greek classic: On first looking into Chapman's Homer. He is also said to have influenced T. S. Eliot.

 **Previous** **Next** 

Europe

In the meantime, translation was developing in other European countries as well. Though the practice of translation was by now a nearly perfected art, yet theories on the practice were still undeveloped. One of the first to come up with a theoretical framework, or to articulate the how and why of translation, was a Frenchman called Etienne Dolet. In 1540, he wrote a book called *How to Translate Well from One Language into Another*. This gave detailed insights into the perils and pitfalls one encounters in the art of translation. He outlined five principles on which the translator should operate. But Dolet is remarkable for one other reason—he is perhaps the first martyr to the cause of translation. He was executed because he was accused of ‘mistranslating’ Plato, or of distorting his views so that Plato came across as an atheist. This also points to the fact that one should be extremely cautious in the use of words while translating! However, Dolet’s views on translation were considered to be valid by his contemporaries like Chapman and are taken seriously by translation theorists today.



Etienne Dolet

◀ Previous Next ▶

Seventeenth Century

The next age in English literature, the 17th century is considered to be the age of prose and reason. This age marked the end of the first romantic age of Shakespeare and is characterized by a return to the classics. In translation too we find a similar change. The translators of the previous age were motivated by the sheer desire to discover other cultures and literatures. But in the 17th century we find more of didacticism in the translators. They wished to bring back the classics and the classical seriousness into English literature. The major translators of the age are its major literary figures – John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Dryden worked on Virgil's Latin classic *The Aenied* and Pope translated Homer's *Odyssey* from Greek. Dryden was also an influential critic. Latin and its grammar played a decisive role in shaping his views on writing styles. It is Dryden who came up with very significant terms in translation theory like metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation. Dryden was of the view that paraphrase or translation that took the middle path was the best.



John Dryden

◀ Previous Next ▶

Translator as Imitator

With Alexander Pope we are stepping into the 18th century when it was believed that a translator should be like a painter who depicted the original with loyalty. But Pope is an exception to this. The famous critic Dr. Johnson thought that Pope's translation of Homer was a feat that few men could equal. But there are people who accused Pope of converting Homer into an English poet. Pope felt that he had a moral duty to the reader, namely of conveying the spirit of the original text. For that he added and omitted parts as he saw fit. Dr. Johnson supported Pope in this, commenting that it is alright to add to a text if it does not harm its spirit.



Abraham Cowley is another poet who was Dryden's contemporary and is known for his translations of Pindar's odes into English. Pindar was an ancient Greek poet and Cowley made use of his form of the ode in English. Cowley becomes significant because he clearly felt that the original need not be adhered to strictly while translating. In this he becomes one of the forerunners of latter day English translators who took liberties with texts they thought were inferior. So he wished to convey the manner in which Pindar wrote, not exactly what he wrote.

It is clear from this that translators of this age felt that it was their duty to introduce classical writers to the readers of their age. For this they often tried to give a contemporary touch to the texts they translated. Here we should make a slight distinction between the age of Dryden and the age of Pope.

When we come to the age of Pope, it was felt that the translator should be more faithful to the original. The famous German poet Goethe was one who believed in this sort of fidelity to the original. The concept of translation as a painting and the translator as an imitator are more important in this age. The 18th century also saw the first book on translation theory in English, which was Alexander Fraser Tytler's *The Principles of Translation* published in 1741. He also maintained that the translator should not alter the original a lot and was essentially disagreeing with Dryden. His belief was that the translator should capture the soul of the original author, but allow that to speak through the translator.

The Romantic Age

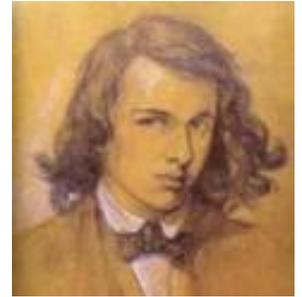
The Romantic Age in which the Imagination became more important than anything else in creativity, saw a change in attitudes to translation. Poetry was seen as spontaneous and emotional. Very often it is difficult to explain what a poem means as the effect of the poem often lay behind the words and sentences. This part of the poem was difficult to capture and convey in another language. Creativity was valued very much and translation that did not require that much of creativity was seen as a secondary activity that derived from the primary act of writing poetry. The poet Shelley was of this view. However, there was a lot of translation activity going on during this period. German authors like Goethe were translated into English and English writers like Walter Scott and Lord Byron were translated into French and Italian.

In this context we should remember the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) who thought of a way out of the problem faced by translators. He was of the view that translations should use a language that retains the ‘foreignness’ of the original so that the reader could get a taste of the original work. Schleiermacher’s model is a much discussed one in translation theory today.



The Nineteenth Century

The Schleiermacher model can be seen reflected in Dante Gabriel Rossetti the pre-Raphaelite English poet who was of the view that the translator was subservient to the original and was bound to translate in a way that the original form and content could be conveyed accurately to the reader. William Morris, another poet of the age, believed that translations should capture all the peculiarities and ‘foreignness’ of the original and pass them on to the reader. His translations of Homer, therefore, are difficult to read because they attempted to convey the archaic nature of the texts that he was translating. But they were very highly regarded by critics and readers of those times. These translators viewed the original works as aesthetic pieces meant for enjoyment, often catering to an elite minority. The scholar-translator was to be respected and implicitly trusted by the reader.

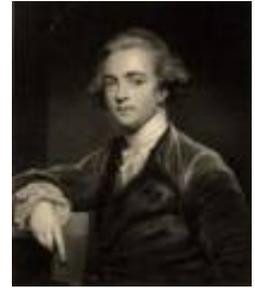


*Dante Gabriel
Rossetti*

They believed that the purpose of translation was to bring the reader close to the original. So the translator had to be completely faithful to the original and should not allow himself to be carried away by personal interpretations. Matthew Arnold in England and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in America were of this view. Longfellow who translated Dante's *Divine Comedy* and *Rubaiyat* said: "The business of a translator is to report what the author says, not to explain what he means; that is the work of the commentator." This resulted in devaluing the work of the translator, because translation was seen as a mediating act that brought a reader and a foreign language text closer. It did not matter if the translator himself/herself was a creative writer in her own right.

Colonial England

But with the rise and spread of colonialism, we perceive a distinct difference of opinion. The imperialist expansion especially in Asia saw the rendering of ancient language texts in English. But contrary to their attitude to Latin and Greek texts, they thought that translations from Arabic and Sanskrit texts were efforts to polish the barbaric beauty of those ancient works. Edward Fitzgerald who translated Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* is the best possible example of this sort of a translator. His translation was more of a recreation of an exotic original, transformed to an entity that the native reader could understand. In the process the translator attempts to polish what he perceives to be the roughness of the original even as he retains its exotic nature. This is apparent even in the early English translations of Sanskrit works like *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, undertaken by Orientalist scholars like Sir William Jones.



Sir William Jones

This attitude came to be criticized a lot later on as being a part of the orientalist mindset. The original text was translated and packaged in such a way to project and preserve a particular image. The East was seen as mysterious and inscrutable and at the same time sensual and indulgent. Hence the translation had a lot of archaisms in it, but sometimes the effect was very far from that of the original. Although these translations were like a 'discovery' of the east by the west, it often presented a distorted version of the original. Translation also became a sort of esoteric activity that was open only to orientalist scholars.

Thus in the 19th century we can see two diametrically opposite viewpoints on translation—one by Dante Gabriel Rossetti who thought that the translator has to be subservient to the original work and the other by Edward Fitzgerald who thought that it was alright to take liberties with works. He was more like a master who made the servant language obey his whims and fancies.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Twentieth Century to the Present

With the dawn of the 20th century we saw an expansion of literary horizons. Colonialist expansion drew the world together and the empires discovered hitherto unknown languages and literatures. This resulted in large scale translation activities. Well known writers and poets were attracted to foreign literature—an example being the American poet Ezra Pound. His work *Cathay* was a translation of Chinese poetry. In fact the American poetic movement called Imagism drew inspiration from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. The Japanese poetic form of ‘haiku’ was the source for many Imagists who emphasized images rather than drawn out poetic language. Translation activity was undertaken on the other side of the Atlantic too. The Orientalist mission of discovering Asian texts was carried on and many early Indian and Arabic texts were translated into English.



However, there were many writers and translators who saw translation as a secondary activity, one that does not require much of creativity. Hilaire Belloc is one such example: “The art of translation is a subsidiary art and derivative,” he believed. There was much debate about how translation should be defined – as an art or as a craft.

Translation Studies as a discipline also started emerging in the latter half of the 20th century. This was largely due to the influence of linguistics in the field of critical theory. This again was derived from a revived interest in the work of the Russian Formalists in the 1920s. They, and later the Prague Linguistic Circle, had concentrated their attention on the language of literature to the exclusion of all other features. The importance given to language also led to the rise in estimation of the activity of translation. It was no longer seen as a secondary activity that could be undertaken by anybody who had a decent knowledge of two different languages. For some reason translation studies took on a more concrete shape in East Europe and emerged in England only much later. J. C. Catford’s book published in 1965 set the stage for translation studies as a discipline in England.

Today Translation studies is a discipline by itself, drawing from various fields of study like linguistics, narratology and aesthetics. Andre Lefevere was one of the first to attempt a definition of the purpose of this field of enquiry: “to produce a comprehensive theory which can also be used as a guideline for the production of translations.” It is clear from this that the theoretical framework of translation studies is connected to the practice of translation. As Susan Bassnett points out, “To divorce the theory from the practice, to set the scholar against the practitioner as has happened in other disciplines, would be tragic indeed.” The theory of translation studies is informed by the experiences of translation and this makes the area vibrant and alive.

Assignments

1. Who are the major translators and translation theorists of the western world?
2. Identify the important events in the translation history of the west.

References

Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. 1980. Revised edition 1991. London: Routledge.

Lefevere, Andre. *Translation History Culture: A Sourcebook*. 1992. London: Routledge.

 **Previous** **Next** 