






The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  Turning points in Translation Studies
-  The Translation Turn
-  Translation and Power
-  Translation and Technology
-  The Translator's Responsibility

 **Previous** **Next** 

Module 11: Future of translation

Lecture 39: Translation in the Twenty first Century

Introduction

What is the position of translation today? And what constructive role can translators play in a world that does not quite know how to deal with pluralities of belief, language and culture? This is what this lecture deals with. The cultural turn resulted in widening the area of enquiry of translation studies, so much so that today it is subsumed under the broad rubric of cultural studies. The concept of translation as an exchange between cultures rather than languages has helped in the term being applied to various non-linguistic activities as well. The postmodern world has come to realize the plurality of languages and discourses, and is attempting or pretending to attempt a better understanding of ‘other’ languages and cultures. This has made translation an important activity. In fact, Edwin Gentzler thinks that the time is ripe for a “translation turn” in fields like linguistics, anthropology, psychology, women’s studies, cultural studies and postcolonial studies (187). We are coming to occupy a ‘translated world’ today.



The shift of focus from linguistics to broader areas of culture also helped to give the field a disciplinary autonomy, a point noted by Michael Cronin (“Double Take”, 229). According to the disciplinary perspective, translation is not an ahistorical activity that takes place in isolation, but is engendered by historical and political reasons. The result was that translations were no longer seen as “free-floating aesthetic artefacts generated by ahistorical figures in a timeless synchronicity of language but as works produced by historical figures in diachronic time” (Cronin, “Double Take”, 229). Translations and the role they have played in the making of a literature, and the questions of what gets translated and does not get translated into a particular language, are seen to point to literary as well as socio-political aspects of that language community. Translations thus assume a significance that transcends the linguistic or cultural boundaries.

But how did translation leave its linguistic territory? In this lecture we attempt to understand the evolution of translation studies and its present position in the world.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 11: Future of translation

Lecture 39: Translation in the Twenty first Century

Turning points in Translation Studies

The major change that occurred in the last century in translation as a practice and a theoretical field of study was its conceptualization as a literary activity that went beyond the linguistic discipline. Till then, the field was dominated by linguists who studied translation purely from their point of view. This began to change with the 1960s when various schools of thought began to make their presence felt in the area of translation. However, there was no synthesis of these multiple strands; people worked in their respective areas with no attempt to incorporate other viewpoints. The literary approach to translation developed in the 1970s especially with James Holmes, who tried to map out an academic methodology for the disciplinary study of translation. But he was not really understood at that time when the field was dominated by linguists. It was around this time that Derrida's deconstructive approach was applied by himself to translation. However all these streams of thought flowed parallel to each other, without any attempt to build bridges across them.

There was an attempt to synthesise various approaches to translation studies in the late 20th century, especially after the cultural turn.

It is this trend that is slowly disappearing in the field of translation studies. Since the last decade of the twentieth century and especially with the promotion of the cultural turn, these schools have tried to coordinate among themselves, and approach translation through paths which are not isolated from each other. José Lambert who started working in the 1980s, is of the view that translation is more of an intercultural than interlinguistic activity. In keeping with many others like Susan Bassnett, he locates translations in their socio-cultural contexts. Lambert goes to the extent of considering every word as 'translated' and the source text as a heterogeneous entity which is a mixture of multiple codes and discourses, many of which remain untranslated. He focuses on these untranslated elements (non-translation) as well. For him, translation is "both a target-oriented empirical science and a transfer-oriented semiotic practice" (Gentzler, 192). Translation is thus liberated from the boundaries of languages and national literatures, and could be intersemiotic as well. This extended the scope of the field to media studies and mass communication. Gentzler points out that this had two consequences: "First it tends to explode the concept of national literature as a useful distinction; secondly, it breaks down distinctions between written and other discursive practices; and finally it opens up the possibility of exploring non-Western discursive practices" (193).

The Translation Turn

Translations Studies had, by the turn of the century, managed to make a dent on disciplinary boundaries, mainly due to the pioneering efforts by André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett with their book *Translation, History, and Culture* in 1978. They co-authored another book in 1998 titled *Constructing Cultures*. In this book they demonstrated how far translation has come since the beginnings and how today it is perceived more as an interaction of cultures. They argued for critical tools that were borrowed from Cultural Studies, especially the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The socio-cultural contexts of translation, the choice of text to be translated, and the impact of translations on a receptor culture were aspects that gained prominence in their approach. In her final essay in the collection “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies”, Susan Bassnett argues for more collaboration between translation theorists and cultural studies scholars, because for her “translations are the performative aspect of intercultural communication” (Gentzler, 194).

This collaboration became a reality in the first decade of the present century with more scholars turning to intersemiotic studies like film and musical adaptations. More importantly, it has opened up the field to non-western discourses especially from the developing countries like India.

Postcolonial studies has joined hands with translation theory resulting in seminal insights into the process of translation from and into relatively minor languages and literatures. Non-western discourses brought in complexities that had not been thought of before. For example, the existence of multilingual ‘originals’ in certain postcolonial societies like



North Africa poses a problem for the translator. The text is already translated in a certain sense because it constantly shifts among Arabic, French, Berber and occasionally Spanish. Samia Mehrez highlights this aspect in her essay “Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: The Francophone North African Text”. The de Campos brothers in Brazil, Haroldo and Augusto, developed the cannibalistic approach to translation, where the act of translation is compared to the cannibalistic act. Here “cannibalism is to be understood not in the Western sense of capturing, dismembering, mutilating, and devouring, but in a sense which shows respect, a symbolic act of taking back out of love, of absorbing the virtues of a body through a transfusion of blood” (Gentzler, 196). To them we owe a lot of innovative terms for translation: “transcreation, transtextualization, transillumination, transluciferation...” (Gentzler, 196). A group of feminist scholars in Quebec (Luise von Flotow, Sherry Simon etc) used translation to highlight their double oppression as women in a minority community.

The result, as Gentzler and Tymoczko point out, has been a “realization that a normative approach was tantamount to an implicit allegiance to a given but unspecified range of values commonly shared by those in power in any given culture” (*Translation and Power*, xii). They argue that the cultural turn has led to an

analysis of power as it is manifested in the practice of translation.

 **Previous** **Next** 

Module 11: Future of translation

Lecture 39: Translation in the Twenty first Century

Translation and Power

Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko explained their thesis on power in the collection of essays they edited called *Translation and Power* (2002). They placed translations within the larger framework of socio-political happenings of the 1960s and 70s in their bid to understand the growing interest in the machinations of power. Western society of the post World War II and Vietnam war era, was increasingly aware of the way readers could be manipulated through literature. This awareness made translation theorists also to explore the relationship between power and translation, or the socio-political contexts of translation practice. This was given a concrete shape in *The Manipulation of Literature*, a 1985 anthology of essays edited by Theo Hermans; it included essays by Gideon Toury, José Lambert, André Lefevere, Susan Bassnett and Maria Tymoczko. The main thrust of their arguments was that translation was a primary, rather than secondary or derivative, literary tool that was used by governments and other power centres to manipulate readers around to their viewpoint. Gradually, the hidden agenda of power behind translations became the focus of many translation theorists, especially after the cultural turn. The attention given to the contexts of translation, its impact on a given culture, and the choice of texts to be translated, in some way or other point to the role of power in this activity. In fact, Gentzler and Tymoczko argue that “the ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies has become the ‘power turn’, with questions of power brought to the fore in discussions of both translation history and strategies for translation” (xvi).



Translation, they maintain, is associated with all aspects of meaning of the word ‘power’, because “translation is a metonymic process as well as a metaphoric one” (xvii). This is because the source text is the storehouse of a range of meanings that the translation can never hope to capture; at best it can only choose what it wishes to represent. In other words, it represents a part of the source text in its attempt to represent the whole, which makes it a metonymic process. It is metaphoric as it substitutes words or phrases for those in the original. The activity of translation is always partial as it depends upon the translator’s personal choice and also will always be incomplete because it cannot ever represent all the possible meanings of the source text. However, Gentzler and Tymoczko are of the view that this partiality need not be considered a defect. It is what makes a translation ‘partisan’ and capable of being committed, thereby becoming an “exercise in power” (xviii). The methodology of translation like the inclusion of analysis of words and phrases and other paratextual material like footnotes etc can reveal a translator’s commitment, and her desire to expose the workings of power in the source text. In fact, many translators have felt liberated from the need to be ‘faithful’ to the source text, “and deliberately subvert traditional allegiances of translation, interjecting their own worldviews and politics into their work” (Gentzler, “Translation, Poststructuralism and Power”, 197). He thinks that one aspect of the ‘power turn’ in

translation studies is that translators have started to assert their presence or power.

 **Previous** **Next** 

Translation and Technology

The assertion of the translator's individuality is however restricted to the academic or literary fields. The domain of the professional translator gives us a different story. This is a field that is impacted by rapidly developing technology, an aspect that we have already discussed with respect to computer-aided or machine translation. Technological developments have affected other aspects of translation besides the actual process of translation. Computers and rapid systems of communication like the email and fax have revolutionized the nature of a translator's work. A majority of freelance translators, especially of non-literary material, can afford to work from home today, provided they own a PC and other accessories that are indispensable to their work. Cronin points out how the "new world of electronically mediated environments where networks are everywhere will produce its own zones of privilege and exclusion" (107). Moreover, by shifting the work of the translator from the space demarcated as the office to the private sphere of home, what is happening is the "deterritorialization" of translation activity (107). This means that the translator is free to determine her employer, working hours and workspace. This freedom however is but an illusion because it rests on the "inbuilt obsolescence of time-based technologies" (107). The other problem with the speed of communication of material to be translated is the expectation of near-instantaneous delivery of the translation. Translators are expected to meet unrealistic deadlines, as they have machine aids at their disposal. This divide between the transmission of material and the time required to translate is never given due recognition by the translation users. Cronin underlines this divide between 'transmission time' and 'processing time' (109). Rapid developments in technology do not really lighten the translator's workload primarily because the decision making process mainly rests on human agency. Cronin sums up the problem: "In effect, the human processing of texts in human time that have originated from other human beings producing text in time is increasingly hidden or annulled by the technology of delivery, so that the time values are those of the machine not of the human being" (109). There is in fact a privileging of the machine over human beings. In fact, many tasks that were previously done by human beings are now done by the computer leading to the coinage of the term 'cerebrofacture' (mechanization of certain intellectual tasks) as opposed to manufacture (qtd in Cronin, 113).



While it is true that machine aids have speeded up the process of translation, what it unfortunately downplays is the human factor that is still important in the activity of translation. It obscures the fact that the success of the process of translation does not always ensure desirable outcomes. As Cronin points out, "The fact that there were no translation problems did not prevent the Americans and the Soviets from holding different points of view on a variety of subjects from Afghanistan and Cambodia to Cuba and El Salvador" (119). A right balance has to be struck between man and machine, without succumbing either to

the euphoric predictions of a completely mechanized translation process or to the dire warnings of doomsday by technophobes.

 **Previous** **Next** 

The Translator's Responsibility

What then could the future hold for the activity of translation in an increasingly mechanized world? One problem with translation today, says Cronin, is that we think of the process of translation to the exclusion of other aspects like the context in which it originated or its impact. As Maria Tymoczko points out, translation is thought of as a metaphoric process, “a process of selection and substitution in which the words of one language are selected so as to substitute for another language” (qtd in Cronin, 132). The better way is to think of the process as metonymic, argues Tymoczko, because “...translators represent some aspects of the source text partially or fully or others not at all in a translation...it is a form of representation in which parts or aspects of the source text come to stand for the whole” (qtd in Cronin, 133). What translators need to do is not allow the human and social aspects of translation get smothered under the landslide of technological development. Cronin says that “there must be an activist dimension to translation which involves an engagement with the cultural politics of society at national and international levels” (134). In short, the political and cultural dynamics behind the process, and the translator's interventions have to be kept visible at all times. This will help us to keep in mind the differences that underlie our seeming unity, and enable us to respect those differences – a quality that is most essential for the survival of the world.

The translator has to be conscious of her social responsibilities.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 11: Future of translation

Lecture 39: Translation in the Twenty first Century

Assignments

1. What are the changes that have come into the field of translation studies since the cultural turn?
2. What do you think is the future of translation in a world that is developing technologically?

References

“Cronin, Michael. “Double Take: Figuring the Other and the Politics of Translation”. *In Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*. Eds. Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C.Kar. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005: 229 – 238.

Cronin, Michael *Translation and Globalization*. London: Routledge, 2003. Rpt.2004.

Gentzler, Edwin. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. 2nd revised edition. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001.

“Translation, Poststructuralism and Power”. *Translation and Power*. Eds. Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002: 195 – 218.

Tymoczko, Maria and Edwin Gentzler. Eds. “Introduction”. *Translation and Power*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002:xxii – xviii.

 **Previous** **Next** 