








## Module 6: Cultural turn in translation

### Lecture 20: Translating in a Globalized World

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## Introduction

The effects of globalization are primarily thought to be in the economic field, but it has drastically changed the world we live in. It has brought the world closer together, forcing differing languages and cultures to communicate with each other on a regular basis. The contemporary world is like the tower of Babel, where there are people speaking in different tongues, not quite able to understand each other. Translation becomes a very essential activity today to understand each other and to do business with each other. The interdependence between countries seems to have undermined the hierarchy that existed within languages, but that is only an illusion. Even though powerful countries/languages need to interact with inferior languages, this has not ushered in equality; on the contrary, the mercantile interests of the world market have brought in a new hierarchy. Today we are forced to speak/ conduct our business/ teach etc in the language of the most powerful, irrespective of which mother-tongue we use. This language is English, and its 'superiority' has nothing to do with its inherent qualities as a language. It happens to be the language of the politically and economically most powerful nation in the world. This power of English has impacted the field of translation and translation studies also, in overt and covert ways.

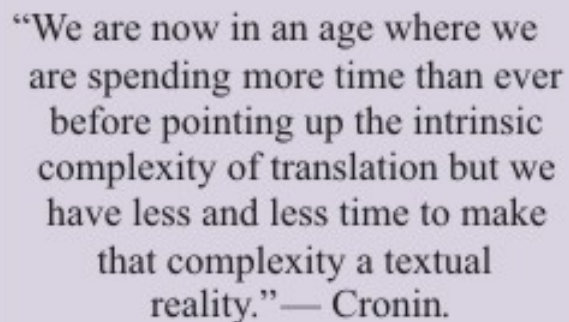
Globalization has succeeded in creating an illusion of egalitarianism among languages, whereas it has only catapulted English to prominence.

Although English is the dominant language, there are occasions when the local languages and cultures have to be taken into consideration. Multinational companies need to advertise in local languages if they wish to sell their products in the local markets. The efforts to tackle terrorism often compel a government to intercept messages in languages they do not often understand. An interpreter who knows an 'inferior' language becomes very useful in this context. So, the linguistic dependence is not only on the part of the so-called inferior and minor languages, but also on the powerful and the mighty.

But there is no denying that the powerful languages do dictate the rules in the field. This applies more to non-literary translation than anything else. As Michael Cronin, the author of *Translation and Globalization* observes, much of the translation that is done today is non-literary, especially in the "scientific, technical, commercial, legal and administrative" areas (2), making it more of a utilitarian and functionalist activity. Cronin points out how translation studies as a discipline has to take this into account, if it wishes to survive in the globalized world today.

## Challenges of globalization

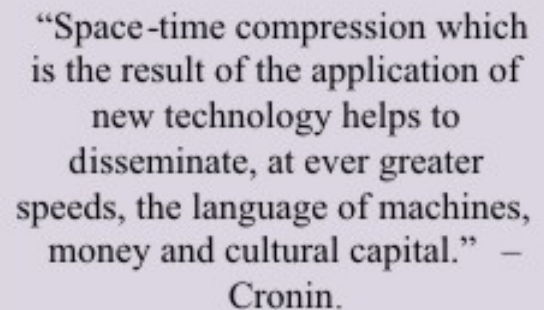
Cronin points out how translators, like everybody else, are susceptible to the influences of the age in which they live. He quotes the postmodern thinker Zygmunt Bauman, who maintains that this is the age of “fluid modernity”, where “time has become a factor independent of inert and immutable dimensions of land-masses or seas” (106). One aspect of this age is the possibility of almost instantaneous communication or the speed with which we can send messages to each other, irrespective of where we are located. This has an impact on translation also, especially of the non-literary kind. With the advancements made in the field of computers and internet, most translators who do functional translation can work from their homes. Though this is empowering in a certain way, it also means that the translator is always working against a deadline that allows her/him very little freedom. The modern day ‘patron’ in Lefevere’s terms or the publisher, demands the translation to be done in a specific form within a specific time. The market economy is such that the publisher is forced to bring out more titles within a shorter span of time, which in turn puts pressure on the translator to churn out his work without having the luxury of getting to know the source text and its author at a leisurely pace. Cronin explains: “As investors seek return on their money, the pressure on publishers is to go for high-volume, minimum-risk titles that are guaranteed a market and that often have a substantial PR component” (120). This means that the translations are mostly target-oriented to suit the tastes of the market. This also means that other questions like the quality of the translation become insignificant before the question of readability.



“We are now in an age where we are spending more time than ever before pointing up the intrinsic complexity of translation but we have less and less time to make that complexity a textual reality.”— Cronin.

### Chronostratification of languages

The shift in emphasis from space to time, or the reduction of time with respect to travel and communication is what Paul Virilio terms 'chronopolitics' (qtd in Cronin 121). Cronin argues that this has implications for language and translation as well. As an example he cites the case of Hungary. The dominant languages in Hungary before Communist rule were German and Latin. With the Communist rule, the official language became Hungarian but it was not well-equipped to deal with the technological innovations that were taking place. So German was used for this purpose. But after the fall of the Communist regime in the 1990s, English came to be the language used instead of German, while Hungarian remained the official language. The result was the rapid Anglicisation of Hungarian, and that too not very smoothly – Hungarian began to incorporate English terms and phrases in their original form causing 'calques'. This is not a healthy development for any language, as it is not forcing Hungarian to come up with its own terms. Rather, Hungarian is taking the easy way out by importing English words into its vocabulary. So development in terms of lexicon is only for English and not Hungarian. This results in what Cronin calls the 'chronostratification' of languages (122). This means that languages like English which are developed enough to encompass technological innovations, will have an edge over languages like Hungarian which are not so developed. This results in a hierarchy that is reflected in translation also. Translations will more often be from English into the inferior language, as English is the source of technical and scientific knowledge.



“Space-time compression which is the result of the application of new technology helps to disseminate, at ever greater speeds, the language of machines, money and cultural capital.” – Cronin.

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## Minority languages

This brings us to another major issue of concern which is that of the status of minority languages in the globalized world. The term minority here refers to the status of that language in the international scenario and not on the number of people speaking that language. For instance, Mandarin though spoken by a substantial number of people would be a minority language because it does not have any decisive role in the world of political, economic or technological power. So would Hindi, Japanese or Dutch. Cronin points out how translation theory is exclusively western-oriented, without taking any of the minority languages into consideration. By western-oriented, he means specifically English and French. Cronin is keen to undermine the notion that the 'west' does not imply a homogeneous power centre, a fact that even postcolonial translation criticism like Tejaswini Niranjana's, is not free of this bias towards the west. Niranjana highlights the short-sightedness of the west in homogenizing the culture of the colonies, but she is guilty of the same homogenization when she refers to Anglo-French culture as 'European'. Why does Niranjana think that English and French can represent all of Europe? What of those other European languages that are in a minority with respect to these two languages?

The state of being in a minority category does not depend on the number of speakers for that language, but on its status in terms of power and influence.

The interesting aspect of these minority languages is that all of them have a rich translation history. These languages translate copiously from English and French. Cronin gives the statistics: 70% of the world's books are produced in English, French, German and Russian. In just the field of children's literature in Britain and the U.S, translations account for only 3% of the total children's books produced. In comparison, Finland has 70% translations, while it accounts for 50% in Netherlands and Italy. But we find very little representation of these languages like Finnish or Italian, in works of translation theory and criticism. These are languages of western societies that are economically and socially in a relatively better position than most Asian or African countries. Even then, they occupy minority status with respect to English.

Cronin points to another danger in this state of affairs. Translation by itself has traditionally been considered to be an 'invisible' process, as very often the translation is made smooth to make it appear as good as the original, where the translator's presence is hardly felt. Cronin argues that minority languages are made 'doubly invisible': "Firstly, there is the general failure to include theoretical contributions from minority languages in translation theory anthologies... Secondly, there is not always a willingness to acknowledge that translation perspectives from the point of view of minority languages will not always be

those of major languages” (140). He also points out that the ‘foreignizing’ translation strategy advocated by those like Schleiermacher might be beneficial only for major languages which can afford to retain foreign terms and phrases. As far as a minority language is concerned, it might be better to face the challenge of a foreign language and invent equivalent terms, thereby expanding its lexical base.

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## Reflection or Reflexion?

The problem that minority languages that translate from a major language faces is that of imitation. It imitates the major language at all levels, from words to sentence construction, so much so that very soon it becomes a reflection of the major language. This practically renders the language dead. Cronin is of the view that the best way to counter this is by using translation as reflexion, by which he means “second-degree reflection or meta-reflection which should properly be the business of translation scholars and practitioners, namely, the critical consideration of what a language absorbs and what allows it to expand and what causes it to retract, to lose the synchronic and diachronic range of its expressive resources” (141). In other words, the ideal translation strategy for a minority language would be domestication or altering the source text to suit the linguistic and cultural peculiarities of the receptor culture. This would make the minority language more cautious about what it takes in and what it loses out in the process of translation.

The other very real danger that minority languages face is that of extinction. Aboriginal languages were the major casualties of the 20th century. A language dies out, not because the speakers of the language are extinct, but it simply cannot stand up to the onslaught of a major language. This dying out is because the speaker of the minority language feels that the major language is more convenient to deal with the matters of daily life. Cronin underlines the ambiguous nature of translations here. According to him, in such circumstances, “Translation is both predator and deliverer, enemy and friend” (142). Ireland is cited as an example. In the 16th century, 90% of the Irish spoke only Irish language. Today only less than 10% are fluent Irish speakers and there is practically nobody who knows only Irish. The Irish have been practically ‘translated into another language’ namely English. One distinction to be made here is between translation as assimilation and translation as diversification. The speakers of a language can be assimilated into another language through self-translation, as is the case with Irish speakers. The other option is to “retain and develop their language through the good offices of translation and thus resist incorporation” (142).





## Language of Technology

Minority or less-developed languages face another drawback when it comes to the dissemination of science and technology. There is the general assumption that these languages are not equipped to deal with the advancements in scientific and technical knowledge that are being made on almost daily basis. For instance, how many scientific books are written in Hindi or other Indian languages? From this also follows the assumption that you need English to deal with the challenges of a modernised world. Unfortunately this seems to be the case when you look at one of the aspects of contemporary life which is the computer and the internet. The language of this world is English, especially American English or cyber English. Cronin points out that “80 per cent of e-mail and data content are in English, a language that is not spoken as either a first or second language by three-quarters of the people on the planet” (143). What happens to those who do not know this particular type of English? Cronin quotes Joe Lockard as the answer: “Non-English speakers have remained the permanent clueless newbies of the Internet, a global class of linguistic peasantry who cannot speak technological Latin” (144). This has created another hierarchy wherein translations have to be from the dominant language, namely English. There have been attempts to counter this by utilizing other languages like Hindi etc on google sites, but they are hardly adequate to ward off the bigger threat of English swamping all other languages. English thus falls into what Cronin categorises as ‘target-language intensive’ languages, where all translations are from English into other languages because English is seen the source of knowledge. The other languages have to translate this knowledge into their own systems. Minority languages are source-language intensive because translation activity is into their languages from others which are considered major or dominant.

The language of technology and scientific advancement is English, and non-English speakers are the underdogs in this cyber-hierarchy.

However, the status of a minor language is never fixed. It is a relative position which is dependent on a lot of factors. Cronin is of the view that this relative positioning of minority languages has a direct bearing on translation theory because of three factors. Firstly, the position of a language can change from that of a major one to being a minor one, depending upon political and economic power. In fact Cronin argues that all languages “are potentially minority languages” (145). The relegation of Persian to an inferior position with the coming of English in India is a case in point. So the translation experience of minority languages is educational for any language, irrespective of whether it is major or minor. The second factor lies in the dichotomy between the target-language intensive and source-language intensive languages. Translation practice in the target-language intensive major language can be studied only against the background of the



translation experience of the minority languages. The third factor is the pressure on minority languages to translate, if they have to keep pace with the latest developments in any domain of knowledge. A recognition of this pressure means that translation is not just an academic activity meant to satisfy purely scholarly curiosity, but an urgent necessity in terms of practical life. Translation thus becomes a reflection of asymmetrical power relations in the world today. Thus translation strategies might also provide strategies of meaningful resistance and empowerment as far as minority languages are concerned.

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## Conclusion

These are but a few of the challenges faced by translators today, especially if they represent a minority language. In the contemporary globalized world, a minority language can be seen as the representative of the local against a global, powerful language. The activity of translation from the dominant language can be done in such a way as to ensure that its individuality is retained even as knowledge transfer is done from the dominant languages. This can become an effective resistance to the tendency to homogenize and to retain cultural and linguistic specificities. Translation provides minority languages with an opportunity to prevent them from becoming nothing more than pale reflections of the dominant / major language and to preserve their identities with respect to their language and culture.

## Assignments

1. What is the concept of chronopolitics? How has it affected translation theory and practice?
2. Based on a reading of this lecture, evaluate the position of your mother-tongue with respect to English.

## Reference:

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

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