










## Module 3: Central Issues in Translation

### Lecture 8: Translatability of Languages

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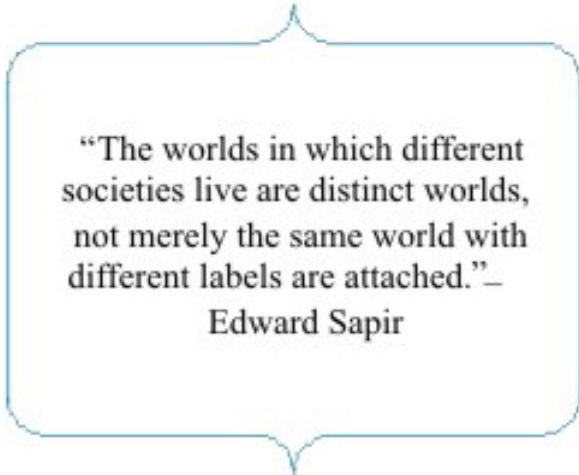
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## Introduction

It is commonly accepted today that translation means more than bringing two languages together; it is bringing two cultures together. Language is a reflection of culture and social milieu. In that sense each language is unique and represents the context that is special to itself. Edward Sapir, the noted linguist states: “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (qtd in Bassnett 13). This brings us then to the question whether languages can really be translated at all.

Carrying across the meaning and style of one particular language into another language that is radically different in terms of culture is difficult. In short, are languages

translatable? For instance, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small things* owes its beauty to a great extent, to its idiosyncratic language and spelling. Roy liberally makes use of capitalization and phonetic spellings of words to emphasize her point. How can this be adequately translated into an Indian language like Malayalam that does not have capital letters? Being a phonetic language (unlike English, it is spoken exactly like the way it is written) the phonetic spellings cannot be reproduced either. The problem is: can Roy's text be translated into languages that are quite unlike the SL? It should be noted that this is a rather quaint problem – the text is not representing a different cultural milieu; in fact it is set in Kerala where Malayalam is spoken. But English, the SL is remote from Malayalam which is a Dravidian language. The book has been translated into Malayalam, and the translator has attested to the difficulties in capturing the zest of Roy's prose. Herein lies the problematic of translatability.



“The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels are attached.” –  
Edward Sapir

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## Translator is traitor?

It is this inherent problem in the process of translation that gave rise to that (in) famous Italian saying about the translator: “Traduttore, traditore” or “Translator, traitor”. The translator, limited as s/he is by restraints imposed by language, will of necessity have to deviate from the original; in that sense s/he is ‘betraying’ the text and hence becomes a traitor. Jose Ortega y Gasset in his essay “The Misery and Splendor of Translation” says that the creative writer is a rebel of some sorts who goes against accepted conventions of language and grammar. The translator who is not that courageous will not follow the author’s defiant act of courage that is his writing. The translator, described by Gasset as a “shy character” lacks the courage of the writer, “will place the translated author in the prison of normal expression; that is, he will betray him” (qtd in Venuti 50). Hence the translator is traitor.



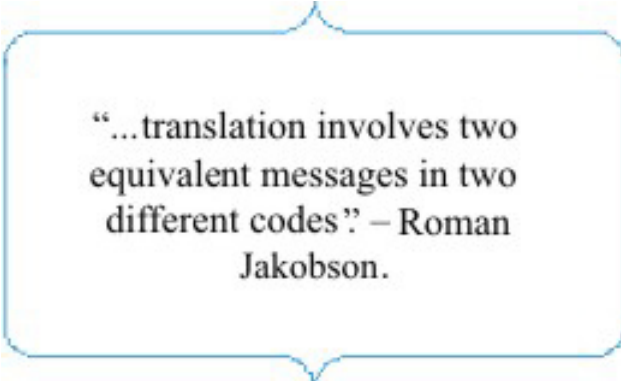
*Jose Ortega y Gasset*

This is of course stating it in exaggerated fashion, but there is an element of truth to what Gasset says. It is true that especially in the case of literature, each writer differs in the matter of style. Style also implies an idiosyncratic and individualistic use of language that might be very hard to simulate in another language. Moreover each language has its own specific structure and pattern with respect to semantics and grammar. To that extent we can agree with Gasset when he says that there is no guarantee that “two words belonging to different languages, and which the dictionary gives us as translations of each other, refer to exactly the same objects” (qtd in Venuti 51). What Gasset proposes is that a translation bring the TL reader closer to the SL by means of an “imitation” or “paraphrase” rather than a translation. In other words, the translation is not made easy or domesticated for the TL reader. The reader can only expect a form of translation that is “ugly” and “must know beforehand that when reading a translation he will not be reading a literarily beautiful book but will be using an annoying apparatus” (qtd in Venuti 62).

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## Translation as Communication

It is an accepted fact in translation studies that translation is also an act of communication between two codes, that of the source language and target language. The problem occurs, as Annie Brisset points out when the two codes are not “isomorphic” or do not share similar patterns (qtd in Venuti 343). As Roman Jakobson puts it, “Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey” (Venuti 116). The gap between the SL and TL is the hurdle that raises the question of translatability. As Jakobson points out even a category like grammatical gender is a problem. For instance, Hindi nouns have genders, and not all of them are logical. A chair which logically should have neutral gender is feminine. It becomes a problem when you are translating into a language where ‘chair’ is masculine. The translator is left with no choice but to adopt the sensible way out which is translate according to the TL. If we agree with Gasset's notion this would amount to betrayal. The situation becomes more complex with literary texts as the language has other factors like word play and puns. Poetry, according to Jakobson, is untranslatable. He says: “Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape to another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting” (Venuti 118).



“...translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes” – Roman Jakobson.

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### Inadequacy of Target Language

The issue of translatability is premised upon the notion that the TL is somehow inadequate to be a suitable vehicle for the ideas, concepts or stylistic nuances of the SL text. These problems are of different sorts. It could be that the TL is a relatively ancient language and might not have equivalents of new concepts or ideas. For example, all terms that have to do with technological advancement might not have easy translations in most Indian languages. Words like 'computer' and all terms related to computer usage, scientific terms or words like railways, train, car, bus etc are retained in English in these languages. Even an illiterate person is more familiar with these terms than their Indian versions. This happens because our languages have not kept up with the advancements made in the west. More importantly, the fields of science and technology use English for dissemination of information and hence English is more familiar as far as the users are concerned.

The target language can be inadequate in its range of vocabulary . It might also fail to recapture the linguistic peculiarities of the SL, like slang words.

Another problem can occur if the SL is use a particular sub-code. For instance slang usage or dialectal usage of the language is a problem for the translator. The translator of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* will have to bring out the differences in the language used by Prof. Higgins and Eliza Dolittle. Shaw has used King's English and Cockney for the same. A translator who is doing a Hindi translation will have to be very careful of the sub-code s/he will use. In some cases it cannot be reproduced adequately. This kind of a problem arises when archaic texts are translated. How does one translate Chaucer into Tamil? Chaucer's English is outdated and not in current use. Does it get translated into ancient Tamil which might need explanatory notes for readers to understand it? Translating it into modern Tamil will make it more comprehensible for the readers, but Chaucer's unique language and style will go unnoticed.

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## Translations as Stimulants of Language

Annie Brisset points out how translations can also stimulate the growth and development of languages. This is not to say that they are capable of generating new languages, but that they can shape and help evolve a language that is in its nascent form. Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German rendered such a service to the German language. This is also true of various Indian language translations of the epics. It helped to hone the rough contours of many languages that were in their infancy.

“A linguistic community is a market. Its vernacular and referential languages are its symbolic commodities, each with its own use value and its own exchange value.”— Annie Brisset.

Brisset distinguishes between four broad areas of languages:

- Vernacular – a language that is spoken locally and spontaneously for communing rather than communication; this can be considered the mother-tongue
- Vehicular – a national or regional language learned for the purpose of communication
- Referential – language that is tied up with the cultural traditions of a society
- Mythical – a language that is largely incomprehensible as it is the language of the sacred texts

In a country with a bewildering array of linguistic variety like India, all these categories exist. The vernacular can be Gujarati and even there it could be a particular regional/dialectical form of the language. If the vernacular is a dialect, the vehicular language can be the accepted or officially recognized form of Gujarati or Hindi. In the context of India this can also be considered to be English. The referential language can be any one of these three and the mythical language can be Sanskrit. A translator has to decide the linguistic register into which s/he wishes to translate. Brisset says that the task of the translation is to replace the language of the “Other” by a native language ( Venuti, 346). Since your language is also a marker of identity, translation also becomes an act of assertion or reclamation of identity.

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## The Invariant Core

No translation can be undertaken unless the translator is confident of being able to convey some part of the SL text. This salvageable part of the text is termed the 'invariant' part of the translation process. Gideon Toury considers the most important part of translation to be “the establishment of the invariant, its transfer across the cultural-linguistic border and the re-composition of the target message” ( Venuti 470). Venuti points out that the concept of the invariant core will vary depending upon the TL culture and literature. He points out how translators of novels in the present day generally stick to the basic narrative form of the original and do not tamper with the plot. This was not always the case. Abbé Prévost (1697-1763) who translated Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* into French, reduced the original seven volumes to four in French. He claimed that he had not in any way changed the author's intention or style, but today we would be inclined to see his work more as adaptation than translation.

Any translation will have changes in the style and dialect of the TL., which are termed “remainders” by Jean - Jacques Lecercle.

Although translations today are reluctant to follow Prevost's path, there will invariably be changes in the language like regional and dialectical variations. Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls these changes the “remainder” because they go beyond the basic univocal meaning and focuses our attention on the contexts of the translation. These contexts could be cultural or socio-political. Venuti explains: “The remainder in literary texts is much more complicated, of course, usually a sedimentation of formal elements and generic discourses, past as well as present” (471). The translator in his/her attempt to communicate the text tends to domesticate the foreign text for the consumption of the TL reader. In the process he might go beyond the primary purpose of communication of a message and incorporate effects of language or style that will be significant only in the TL.



## Translatability of poetry

Translatability as an issue has been much discussed in the context of literary genres. It is popularly believed that it is much more difficult to translate poetry than prose. Literary language is a balance between form and content, and it relies on a hidden network of suggestions; the translator has to be alive to the nuances of the text. It is, as Robert Scholes points out, a complex structural system working within the larger structure of literature as a whole. The translator has to recognize the balance between these often dialectical systems. It is to be noted that the translator is first a reader of the text and then an interpreter. Gayatri Spivak has remarked: “Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate” (Venuti 398). The translator has to read with care and sensitivity, and note the cultural context in which the text is rooted. To an extent, this reading also involves interpretation.

“The greatest problem when translating a text from a period remote in time is not only that the poet and his contemporaries are dead, but the significance of the poem in its context is dead too.” –Susan Bassnett

The translation of verse should ideally be into verse and that is precisely the problem with its translation. Sir John Denham is essentially underscoring this point when he says that “poesie is of so subtle a spirit that in the pouring out of one language into another it will all evaporate...” (qtd in Savory 80). In fact Andre Lefevere categorises seven strategies of translation of poetry – phonemic translation, literal translation, metrical translation, poetry into prose, rhymed translation, blank verse translation and interpretation. Basically a translator resorts to one of these strategies, depending on his/her interpretation of the poem and the choice of component that s/he wants to foreground. If it is an ancient text, the problems increase; the text as well as its language might not have any contemporary significance at all. An old English text like *Beowulf* is a case in point. The ‘translatability’ of the epic is grounded in the decisions made by the translator.

Nida points out how the question of formal and dynamic equivalence becomes even more of an issue in the case of translation of poetry. A poem has a fine tension between form and content and a careless move by the translator can upset this balance. It would be absolutely detrimental to the spirit of the poem if a literal translation is done. Too much emphasis on dynamic equivalence can obscure the stylistic beauty. For example, the onomatopoeia of Tennyson's “The Lotos Eaters” is integral to the understanding of the poem. A translation that does not do justice to the language will be inadequate; if it is a translation between two very different languages, it becomes even more of a problem.



## Translation of Drama

The text of a play is but one component of what we generally call drama. The non-verbal part plays a crucial role in the eventual appreciation of a play. How is a play to be translated? As a purely literary text or as a comprehensive work that has verbal and non-verbal components? There are people like Anne Ubersfeld who believe that text and performance cannot be delinked and any translation that looks at text alone is a highly inadequate one. Peter Bogatyrev has pointed out how a character's social situation is brought out not just by the text alone but extra-textual factors like “the actor's gestures, finished off by his costumes, the scenery, etc” (qtd in Bassnett 122). The dramatic text also has undertones that reveal the nature of relationships or the mental state of a character. It is these nuances that tend to slip through the gaps of translation. The good theatre translator cannot afford to ignore these paralinguistic aspects of dramatic performance. It can also not be denied that certain texts like Shakespeare have been translated as written texts without much attention to the performance aspect. The plays of Bernard Shaw with their long speeches also tempt the translator to focus only on the written part. What is significant about these plays is that they are largely taught as academic texts without their performance component. In terms of translatability, the difficulty level posed by dramatic texts would come second to poetry.

Translation of a play involves the translation of verbal as well as non-verbal components.

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**Translation of prose**

The style of prose fiction and non-fiction does not have the complexity or density of poetic styles and is more malleable as far as the translator is concerned. All the problems outlined in translation apply here also, but these are relatively fewer as the genre allows greater flexibility. Translators can to a certain extent focus on the content rather than the form when they are translating a novel. But here also the translator has to be alive to the currents and counter-currents of language that eddy and churn to yield meaning. Which aspect has to be foregrounded—the content or form or both – is ultimately the translator's discretionary choice. This in turn depends on the aim and audience of the translation. If the purpose is to introduce a classic in a foreign language to the reader, the translator can make exercise his/her freedom in translating it. But if it is meant to highlight the stylistic and semantic aspects of the text, domestication is not the method.

It is quite clear that there is no universal criterion to determine whether a language has translatability or not. It will depend on the nature of languages that are translated, the genre, the purpose and the readership to which it caters. This does not mean however, that there is complete correlation between two languages.

**Assignments**

1. What are the problems encountered in translation between two languages?
2. Select a play in one language and try to translate it into another language. What are the challenges that you face in this?

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