









Module 4: Theories of translation

Lecture 13: Indian Aesthetic Theories and Translation

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Introduction

Translation Studies as a discipline and the theories associated with it have a distinct western bias. Since they have a dominating influence on our knowledge systems, it is not surprising that the concepts of translation that exist in India today coincide with those of the west. But there have been scholars who thought about the process of translation in India and the possible impact of ancient Sanskrit aesthetic theories on it. The notion today about translation, in the west as well as the rest of the world, is that it is a transfer of meaning from one language to another, and for a translation to be good, the meaning of the original has to be retained, more or less intact. This notion of equivalence and the strategies involved in the method of translation have worried translators and translation theorists in the west down the centuries. We cannot say the same about the concepts of translation in India.

The basic concept of carrying across meaning from one language to the other is absent in the Indian translation tradition. The Indian language terms for translation, like *tarzuma* or *bhashantar* reveal this.

The very word 'translate' comes from the Latin 'translatio' where 'trans' means across and 'latus' means carrying; this implies the carrying across of meaning from one language to the other. The various Indian language words for translation do not convey this meaning. Anuvad (speak after), bhashantar (linguistic transference), tarzuma (reproduction), or roopantar (change of form) – these are a few Indian language terms for translation. As these terms show, none of them imply the concept of carrying across of meaning from one language to the other. On the other hand, all of them point to the idea of transcreation rather than docile transference of meaning from one linguistic system to the other. So this implies that our basic concept of translation was different; if so, how should we approach the field today? Do our ancient theories of aesthetics have anything to say on the subject?

Module 4: Theories of translation

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Translating consciousness of India

India is a multi-lingual country and has always been so. G. N. Devy terms the Indian consciousness as a “translating consciousness” (*In another Tongue*:135). Sanskrit was the dominant language in the northern part of India but other languages like Prakrit, Pali and Apabhramsa were used as languages of communication by the common masses. Sanskrit was the language of literature and religious rites. But even in the Sanskrit plays of Kalidasa and other playwrights of the time, the women and lower caste/ class characters speak Prakrit or other dialects like Sauraseni and Magadhi. It was normal and acceptable to change from one dialect into another or one language into another in the course of the same text. Devy points out: “The extent to which bilingual literary production has been accepted in India as a normal literary behaviour, and the historical length of the existence of such practice are indicative of India's ‘translating consciousness’.” (136)

There are actually two distinct language families in India – the Indo-Aryan and the Dravidian. The most ancient of the Dravidian languages is Tamil. The other Dravidian languages are Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam which evolved later than from Tamil. The primary Indo-Aryan language is Sanskrit which combined with various local dialects to give rise to the languages of the north. The Indo-Aryan languages might share linguistic features with the languages of the west, more than with the Dravidian group of languages. So, translation from Hindi to Malayalam means that translation is between two languages that are radically different although they belong to the same region called India. The translator has to be very conscious of this while s/he translates in India. But despite this diversity, we can safely state that Indian languages own a shared sensibility, partly derived from ancient theories of literature and language.

Devy points out how the obsession with equivalence in translation is essentially a western metaphysical obsession. He quotes Hillis Miller's statement: “Translation is the wandering existence in a perpetual exile”. This is linked to the Christian theological concept of the fall from Paradise and the consequent exile in search of a country. Devy explains: “In Western metaphysics translation is an exile, and an exile is a metaphorical translation—a post-Babel crisis. The multilingual, eclectic Hindu spirit, ensconced in the belief in the soul's perpetual transition from form to form, may find it difficult to subscribe to the Western metaphysics of translation” (135).

The obsession about equivalence is linked to western theological concerns with a paradise that was lost and has to be regained. The Indian translator does not necessarily subscribe to this metaphysical obsession with meaning.

What he is emphasizing is the basic difference in the world

views of two different cultures that is bound to have an impact on all aspects of creativity, including translation. The obsession with the original and the anxiety of not being able to capture the meaning is in some way connected to the theological concept of a paradise that has been lost and has to be regained. The Indian psyche that believes in the constant progression of the soul from one birth to the other is not concerned about an original state. This is because we have the cyclical concept of life and time where there are no origins or endings. Hence the almost metaphysical obsession about equivalence that haunts translation activity in the west is alien to us.

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Indian theories of aesthetics - Rasa

If equivalence is not a major issue for Indian translators, what are the problems that they face? Does it mean that translation can be a free-for-all exercise? Not quite. We might not be overly concerned about meaning and equivalence, but there are other areas that we are careful about. The critic T. R. S. Sharma has identified four major areas in which translators face problems – *rasa*, *riti*, *alamkara* and *dhvani*.

One of the main theories, if not the most important theory, of Sanskrit aesthetics is the theory of *rasa*. Propounded by Bharata in his work *Natyashastra*, *rasa* is the ultimate emotional pleasure that can be derived from a work of art. Bharata gives a formula for the arousal of *rasa* – *vibhavanubhava vyabhichari samyogad rasa nispatti* – which means that the combination of *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhichari bhava* gives rise to *rasa*. *Vibhavas* are the stimulants of emotions, *anubhavas* the physical responses that go with these emotional responses and *vyabhichari bhavas* are transitory emotions. The basic emotions (*bhavas*) of the reader or spectator, who reads / watches a literary text or performance, are aroused by the *vibhavas*. The emotional response is indicated by the *anubhavas* and *vyabhichari bhavas*. *Rasa* is this heightened emotional response to the text.

Critics differed as to how *rasa* could be aroused, but none disputed Bharata's statement that *rasa* is the ultimate purpose of a work of art. Sharma calls *rasa* the 'shaping principle' or that quality which gives the work of art its distinctive quality. He is of the view that this 'inner rhetoricity' of *rasa* would give the translator the overall orientation of the text. ("Translating Literary Texts through Indian Poetics: A Phenomenological Study" <http://www.anukriti.net/tt1/article-k/a3.html/>) So, it is very important for a translator to be able to recognize the *rasa* of a work, before it could be transplanted into another language and culture. The Gujarati writer Navalram terms this the 'rasanusar' method of translation, where the *rasa* of the original is captured by the translator. Basically this means that the translator has to capture the spirit of the original and attempt to evoke a similar response that the original had on its readers.

Other Areas



Riti is basically the style of the text. Sharma defines it as “the stylistics working within the text – the phonetic and the syntactic limits within which the text enacts, performs” (3). *Riti* should not be confused with the western concept of rhetoric because rhetoric is a broad term that covers figures of thought also. Sharma is of the opinion that *riti* means “the ‘ways of saying’ ...or the attitude the writer has formed toward the experience he is narrating” (3). The translator's ear has to be tuned to this ‘sound of sense’ (as Robert Frost puts it) and the way in which this transforms the structure and syntax of the text. If the translator cannot capture this effect, the translation fails. This act of translation also involves interpretation to some extent because s/he has to arrive at the correct nuance mostly by interpretation. Attempting to approximate the prose rhythm of the original is one way of capturing the *riti* of the original. Sharma gives the example of translating Hemingway and Faulkner respectively. Hemingway uses monosyllabic words to great effect; so when translating him into Hindi or Kannada it makes sense to use ‘*desi*’ words or colloquial language. On the other hand, Faulkner with his heavy diction, can be translated using *marga* or literary language.

Alamkara is the use of poetic ornaments in a literary work, be it fiction or poetry. Most writers use images to express themselves and these should resonate with the translator. Sharma points out that sometimes there might be a dichotomy between the *alamkaras* and the ideology that is being discussed in the work. This could be done deliberately by the author. The example he gives is that of U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, which was brilliantly translated by A. K. Ramanujan who was himself a poet. The *alamkaras* of the novel is at variance with the ideology of the protagonist, resulting in a tension that adds to the complexity of the novel. This is a conflict without resolution which can lead to deconstruction of the text itself. Only a sensitive translator can pick up the latent tensions in a novel or poem.

The translator has to be sensitive to the rhythm and other linguistic nuances of the source text. *Riti* is not merely the style of writing, but the sound that captures the sense or essence of the source text.

A poem by default would have an abundance of *alamkaras* which might be difficult to recapture. Hence there is the popular belief that poems are a problem for the translator – as Frost puts it, “poetry is what gets lost in translation”. The vast difference between the source and target languages also complicate the matter further. Just like *riti*, the translator has to exercise her/his discretion in selecting the right *alamkara*

to express the author's viewpoint. This would be in consideration of the reader's culture rather than the author's language / culture.

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Dhvani

Dhvani is an important concept in Sanskrit aesthetics. It literally means suggestion. Anandavardhana, the greatest exponent of *dhvani*, maintained that it is the soul of poetry. What is meant by *dhvani* is the layer of meaning beyond denotation and connotation and often becomes the very essence of a work of art. This becomes a knotty issue in translation. The most famous example given by all theoreticians is 'the village on the Ganga'. To readers who are unfamiliar with Hindu culture, it is a sentence that describes a village by a river. But for the Indian reader, there is a wide network of meanings that is associated with the Ganga. It suggests holiness and purity; how does a translator capture this resonance of meanings when s/he translates? As Sharma describes it, "it [dhvani] is the region of puns and polysemy, of personal allusions, esoteric symbolism, and indigenous myth, which often commune beyond words" (4). This is indeed difficult to translate unless you provide footnotes or extended explanations.

Dhvani or the layer of meaning that lies beyond denotation and connotation, is difficult to be reproduced in another language. The wide network of meanings and other cultural allusions implicit in *dhvani* makes it difficult to be translated adequately.

Sharma gives another example to illustrate *dhvani*. He uses the last stanza of Frost's famous poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". He points out that the desire to stop and watch the lovely, dark and deep woods is like a death wish. He resolutely shrugs off this temptation and sets his face to his destination which is miles away. Sharma says: "Behind this momentary fascination, there is the whole puritan history which highlights the sinfulness of man, and of nature which the puritans viewed with a sense of fascinated horror" (4). Indian readers who have not internalized this concept of horror of beauty that allures and destroys, will fail to get to the deeper resonances or *dhvani* of the poem.

These are the areas that the translator has to focus on, if he wishes to produce a good translation. But then it is justified to ask how this is essentially different from a western concept of translation. Instead of an obsession with meaning and equivalence, we think about *dhvani* and *riti*. Devy disagrees with this and argues that Indian theories agree with post-structuralist, especially Derridean concepts of meaning.

Bhartrhari and Sphota

To illustrate this, Devy goes back to an ancient text of language and grammar called Vakyapadiya written by Bhartrhari, which is renowned for the *sphota* theory. The *sphota* concept goes back to another grammarian called Patanjali who used it to describe the various stages in the articulation of a word. According to this, *sphota* is the final stage in the articulation when the word is uttered aloud. Bhartrhari expanded this concept to the realm of philosophy, maintaining that the world is brought into existence by the articulation of the word. Language is not the medium for us to express ourselves, but is the medium that expresses us. Devy points out that this combines “a material view and a transcendental view of language” (147). According to Bhartrhari, language by itself does not have a sequence although it is expressed in a sequentially graded body. The relation between the uttered word and meaning or *nada* and *sphota* is like the relation between an object and its reflection in flowing water. Like the reflection, the uttered word reflects the meaning as well as the nature of the giver of that meaning. So meaning is not a fixed entity, but is entirely contextual. As we have seen with Derrida's concept of language, this would free the translator from the concern of attaining the meaning of the original.

According to Bhartrhari, the relation between word and meaning is not fixed. Like the moving reflection of an object in flowing water, the word reflects the meaning, depending on the context of speech and nature of the speaker.

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Auchitya

There are other scholars who feel that another Sanskrit concept is more crucial for translators, which is that of *auchitya*. *Auchitya* means decorum, but in the context of translation it can be seen as the discretion that is exercised by the translator in the selection of texts for translation. Avadhesh K. Singh, in his introduction to the book *Translation: Its Theories and Practices*, says that *auchitya* “should mean propriety in the selection of a text for translation, of methodology and strategy used for translation; and of placing the text in proper perspective, so that the source writer's / text's intended, not merely articulated meaning finds its proper expression in the target text” (xi). Shanta Ramakrishna exemplifies the concept of *auchitya* in translation by going back to Premchand and Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi in

Auchitya is the discretionary judgement exercised by translators in their choice of text and translation strategy.

India . In the late 19th and early 20th century India, when the dominant trend was to translate from English to various Indian languages, Vidyarthi translated Victor Hugo's French book *Quatre-vingt-treize* as *Balidaan*. The book which was on the French Revolution was used by Vidyarthi to infuse the spirit of nationalism in the people of the day. But it was an ‘unfaithful’ translation as it was more of an adaptation than a translation. In his preface, Vidyarthi expressed the opinion that a translation and the original can never be the same and that the reader should not expect it to be so. Premchand did something similar with his translation of Anatole France's *Thais*. He chose it for ideological reasons and wanted it to be an inspiration for his contemporaries. Shanta Ramakrishna argues that in making their translations more suitable to the target readers, these translators were exercising the principle of *auchitya*. They chose a text that they thought would be relevant to the target readership and adopted a translation strategy that was most suitable for that – this would be *auchitya* in translation (“Cultural Transmission through Translation”, *Changing the Terms*: 93).

Conclusion

Although there are terms that we can possibly apply to translation, there do not seem to be a well-defined set of Indian translation theories that are in wide use. This is still a relatively new area where people are exploring the possibilities. But there are a few theorists and critics who have extensively dealt with the topic and come up with insightful comments. They will be dealt with in the next lecture.

Assignments

1. How do Indian theories of aesthetics influence translation theory in India?
2. In your opinion, which of the Indian theories of aesthetics seems more applicable to translation today? Why?

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