Module 4: Theories of translation

Lecture 10: Scientific Bent in translation

The Lecture Contains:

- **Philological Perspective**
- Linguistic Perspective
- Communicative Perspective
- Sociosemiotic perspective
- Chomsky
- Influence on translation theory
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Introduction

Translation had been thought of as a purely literary and secondary activity which was undertaken by scholars who had bilingual, if not multilingual, capabilities. It was not thought of as a science at all, and least of all was it thought to have a theoretical foundation. The journey of Translation Studies towards a more scientific and systematic methodology was pioneered by Eugene Nida, an influential force in the field of translation theory in the U.S. Translation that had been viewed as a secondary activity without any theoretical base in the U.S was given a direction and 'elevation' to the status of a science by Nida. His theory evolved from the practice of translation, as it was a direct offshoot of his own translation of the Bible. Nida's major works are *Message and Mission* (1960) and *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964).

Eugene Nida helped to evolve a systematic approach to Translation Studies by supplying it with linguistic and other scientific tools.

Nida in his essay "Theories of Translation" outlined four major perspectives in translation theory. He stated that the different ways in which texts are translated in the process of interlingual translation, can basically be categorized according to four different viewpoints:

a. The SL text, its history of production, transmission and interpretation (Philological)
b. Languages involved in the process, including SL and TL (Linguistic)
c. The process of communication that goes on behind the translation (Communicative)
d. The different language and culture codes that are involved in the process (Sociosemiotic)

Nida points out that these categories are not always antagonistic but complementary and supplementary. He himself seemed to prefer the sociosemiotic approach.

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Philological Perspective

Nida traces the philological perspective in western translation to Cicero, Horace, Augustine and Jerome. They were concerned about the accuracy of translations and the focus of \their discussions was ‘faithfulness' to the SL text. Questions of faithfulness are inevitably linked to the interpretation of the text. Nida points out how this became a primary focus especially in the case of Bible translations. Among other translators of the earlier ages he counts Luther, Etienne Dolet, Cowley, Dryden and Pope as those with a philological bent; of these, he considers Luther to be the most influential. The philological perspective continues; George Steiner, John Felstiner (author of *Translating Neruda*) etc are modern representatives of the philological perspective. It can be seen that these translators are more concerned with the text, its interpretation and how it should be presented to TL readers. This approach has its limitations. Nida says that practitioners of this approach realized the narrowness of its focus and acknowledged that other linguistic and cultural aspects need to be factored into the process of translation.

> The philological perspective is more hermeneutic in nature – it is concerned with the interpretation of the text and how it is presented to the TL reader.

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Linguistic Perspective

Translation involves two languages and it is no surprise that linguists should be interested in the process. They study the SL and TL structures to understand translation better. In fact, translation was for a long time thought to be the natural territory of linguists. Nida acknowledges the contributions of linguists like Sapir, Bloomfield and Jakobson especially in the field of the study of the functions of language. Chomsky's transformational generative grammar was a path-breaker of sorts, helping translation theorists like Nida to find their own feet. Chomsky helped to make translation studies more precise. As Nida puts it, “its [Chomskyan] Boolean rewrite rules and seemingly precise formulas for embedding” made it valuable for computer-aided machine translation also. (“Theories of Translation”, http://www.scribd.com/doc/49330223/Theories-of-E-Nida). Philosophers interested in questions of language, like Wittgenstein, Willard Quine and Paul Ricoeur, have contributed indirectly to the growth and evolution of this perspective.They focused their attention on the language of philosophical discussions, as part of their endeavour to make philosophy more accessible to the people. This encouraged interest in the ordinary use of language and helped to avoid a naive belief in the reliability of natural language. This, according to Nida, had an indirect impact on linguistics and translation.

> “Some important indirect contributions to a linguistic approach to translating have been made by a number of philosophers interested in linguistic analysis as a way of bringing philosophy down from the clouds of truth, beauty, and goodness to the realism of talking about the language of philosophical discussion.” -- Nida

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Communicative Perspective

The development of communication theory and the concepts associated with it were applied to the field of translation mainly by Nida himself especially in the volume *From One Language to Another* edited along with de Waard. The communication model that consists of sender, message, receptor, feedback, noise, setting and medium was applied to the translation paradigm also. According to this, translation also is essentially a message that is decoded and then recoded by the translator for the receptor. Sociolinguists who study the use of language in a society have made important contributions to the study of translation based on communication theory. Nida points out that an understanding of the ways in which language is used in interpersonal relationships in any given society is crucial to the act of translation.

Emphasis on the communicative aspects would also mean that the translator is primarily concerned about the translatability of languages. The functions of language – viz. informative, expressive, imperative, cognitive, to name a few – influence translation. In this context Nida points out how, contrary to popular perception, the informative function is perhaps the least important of all functions of language. Attention to functions leads to an attention to "discourse structures" or those of "rhetoric" and "poetics". This means that an evaluation of a translation "must be in terms of the extent to which the corresponding source and receptor texts adequately fulfil their respective functions. ("Theories of Translation") According to Nida, the minimal requirement for adequacy of a translation would be that the receptor language readers are made aware of the emotional and cognitive responses of the source language readers to the text. Maximal requirement would be that the responses of the receptor language readers are similar to those of the source language ones. Nida observes that the former yardstick can be applied to translations between languages that are far apart in terms of culture and linguistic culture. The 'maximal requirement' criterion, on the other hand, should be applied to closely related languages like English and French. Theorists like Georges Mounin and Katharina Reiss are examples of those who look to the communication paradigm behind translation theory.

> "The minimal requirement would apply to texts which are so separated by cultural and linguistic differences as to make equivalent responses practically impossible e.g translations in to English of West African healing incantations. A maximal requirement would apply to the translation of some of Heinrich Heine's poems into English." - Nida

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Sociosemiotic perspective

This perspective views communication as an act that involves numerous codes. Nida points out how the impact of a verbal message is not that of words alone, but of extralinguistic and paralinguistic aspects like the background of the speaker, his/her sincerity, knowledge and expertise etc. It is not as if people are conscious of these elements, but they play a vital role in their response to a statement. Here we see an interplay of verbal and nonverbal codes that go into the process of communication. These codes are present in written communication also and hence they have a role in translation.

> The socio-semiotic perspective is more comprehensive as it looks at language as rooted in the socio-cultural contexts of everyday life.

Language is seen as a code that is embedded in the socio-cultural context and communication will be influenced by all these factors. Communication is seen as a dynamic activity, closely linked to the social customs and practices as well as individualistic peculiarities. It is also a reciprocal act – the sender awaits feedback from receptor through verbal and nonverbal codes. Translation that takes all these factors into account will be sensitive to source and receptor socio-lingual codes.

Nida outlines the advantages of the sociosemiotic approach:

1. It perceives language as the offshoot of a host of socio-cultural factors and hence rooted in the everyday world of reality, rather than in an ideal speaker community.
2. It can be verbally creative as its focus is on actually spoken language; it is not bound by reductive rules of language.
3. It does not conceive of language as a rigid system with clear cut boundaries and a well established meaning underlying it. It acknowledges the malleability of language and the indeterminacy of meaning.
4. It takes into account the interdisciplinary nature of codes, which tends to expand the boundaries of translation activity.

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Chomsky

Nida's translation theory owed a lot to a new trend in linguistics. Linguistics which had hitherto worked on languages and their structural aspects, began to look for universals or commonalties that underlay different languages. Translators became interested in this as this helped them in their search for satisfactory translation methods. The pioneer of this new wave in linguistics was Noam Chomsky whose *Syntactic Structures* was published in 1957.

Generative transformational grammar, as conceptualized by Chomsky, had a different perspective of language. Grammar is structured and is composed of numerous levels. The ‘base component' is the primary level. It consists of two kinds of rules – phrase structure rules and lexical rules. Both are common to all languages. Phrase structure rules are those governing semantic and syntactic information of a language and generate deep structure. This deep structure is modified by transformational rules and generates surface structure. All sentences in a language belong to surface structure. According to Chomsky, the phrase structure rules that encode the semantic and syntactic information of a language are similar to the workings of the unconscious in the human mind. Deep structure determines meaning and surface structure determines sound.

Language learning according to Chomsky is intuitive; he stated that the human mind knows language even before formally acquiring it. There were many sceptics who questioned this statement. Gentzler points out that it had another drawback in that it was not based on a living language but an ideal situation. He quotes Chomsky to prove his point: “Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions...” (Gentzler 49).

“Chomsky has idealized the speaking subject and has empowered it with unique abilities with regard to its creative ability to use language” – Gentzler.

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Influence on translation theory

Chomsky's theory was appropriated by translation theorists because it conceptualized a universal pattern behind different grammatical structures and Nida was one of the first to make use of this theory.

It has been noted earlier that the purpose of the translation decides the methodology. This was the case with Nida. In the course of the translation of the Bible he was made acutely aware of the importance of conveying the message as accurately as possible. He was unhappy with the prevalent modes of translation that gave more importance to form than content. He saw this as a direct descendant of 19th century attitudes to translation as epitomized by Matthew Arnold. Arnold had insisted on retaining all the difficult foreign elements of the SL text as they were without domestication, for the benefit of the TL reader. It was the duty of the reader to rise up to the situation and understand the text. This puts pressure on the reader; s/he is expected to be a scholar who is educated and refined and is almost at par with the writer/translator. Nida disliked this elitist approach; if the word of God had to be accessible to the common man, one could not afford such an attitude. It was the translator's duty to get across the word to the lay reader and s/he had to look for ways in which it could be done in a satisfactory way. Nida's example was the American Standard Version of the Bible. It was a literal translation of the Bible that was in the English language but foreign in terms of its grammar and structure. It was read by students of theology but not by the general reader. Nida's point was that for the Bible to be read, it has to be translated into a familiar idiomatic language.

Nida's theory of translation is motivated by the fundamentally proselytizing nature of his Bible translations. This is the reason why he came up with the concept of dynamic equivalence, where the emphasis is on conveying the message of the text correctly.

Gentzler argues that Nida's 'scientific' theory of translation has a direct connection to his evangelization mission or the mission of spreading the word of God. Nida believed that there is a unitary meaning behind every text that can be and should be, conveyed adequately into another language. It is in this context that Chomsky's theory helped Nida formulate his theory of translation. Despite Chomsky's warnings on the appropriation of transformational generative rules to other areas, Nida borrowed from precisely that area. The Chomskian concept of common features or 'universals' that is present in all languages was interpreted by Nida as the single, unitary message that is hidden in the text, waiting for the translator to bring it out. This is what prompts Gentzler to comment: "If Chomsky's theoretical base is Platonic, Nida's is Protestant" (Gentzler 52). Nida's theory took the socio-cultural contexts of SL and TL respectively and translated in such a way that the TL reader could comprehend the SL well.

The practical difficulties that Nida encountered in translating the Bible into a language that was far removed in terms of culture is perhaps what led him in the direction of the sociosemiotic perspective. So, unlike Chomsky who pays more attention to the sign, Nida pays more attention to the response to the sign. In Biblical translation this would assess whether the receptor has really understood the word of God or not. However, Nida's primary concern "is not with the meaning any sign carries with it, but with how the sign functions in any given society" (Gentzler 53). This is a more pragmatic approach to the concept of meaning. However, since he believes that the source is unitary (which is God in the case of Bible translation), the intention in communication is stable. Gentzler states: "Nida's theory emphasizes not

formal correspondence, but functional equivalence; not literal meaning but dynamic equivalence; not "what" language communicates, but "how" it communicates" (53).

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Implications of Nida's theory

Gentzler argues that Nida's theory, despite its emphasis on dynamic equivalence, is as abstract as Chomsky's. It seems to assume that the SL text can be seen as something having a unified meaning. Moreover, it assumed that a translation can evoke from the TL reader an emotional and cognitive response which is similar to what the SL readers had to the original. Meaning is defined according to the function of the SL text and it is given a status similar to that of universal structure.

This also makes demands on the translator. To understand the meaning, s/he should not only know both the languages involved in the process, but also know the subject matter thoroughly. The translator should have an empathetic relationship with the SL author, and have an ability to get underneath the skin of the author. This is important to understand the meaning of the SL text. This of course requires the translator to totally subjugate her/his personality to that of the author. Gentzler points out that this also has the problem of what in literary terms is called ‘intentional fallacy' or guessing the author's intention. Very often a literary work might convey what its author had not intended.

Nida’s theory demands more from the translator because it requires her/him to know the SL and the author of the SL text, in all their complexities.

Despite the obvious preference for the sociosemiotic perspective, Nida seems to be going back to the concept of fidelity in translation. Who is more faithful to the SL text – the translator who does ‘word for word' translation or the one who conveys the basic meaning of the text even as s/he deviates from the original in these formal elements? Nida says that the former might lose the wood for the trees and go completely astray in arriving at the meaning. It cannot be denied that Nida seems to have a contradictory stand on the issue: on the one hand he is pointing to the essential instability of language and showing how it changes from place to place and time to time. But paradoxically he also insists on a meaning that is an unchanging entity behind the flux of language, which is an idealistic view that contradicts his pragmatic approach to language and translation.

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Nida's Contribution

Nida is but one of the many translation theorists but he is a very influential one. He gave a theoretical and scientific bent to translation that was thought to be a secondary and derivative activity in the U.S. But there are critics like Gentzler who point out: “The assumption that [the] higher, originary message not only exists, but that it is eternal and *precedes* language is always already presupposed by Nida, and it affects his science” (59). By reiterating the primacy of meaning what Nida is doing is privileging what he perceives to be the message of the SL text. He does not trust his readers to understand the text by themselves and polishes and prunes it according to his tastes. The result is a text that is doctored to avoid the inherent ambiguities and instabilities of all literary works. This is why Gentzler would say that Nida provides an “excellent model for translation” for a manipulative purpose (like the translation of the Bible) but that his theory fails to become a science.

In spite of this criticism we cannot deny that Nida has made valuable contribution to translation theory. He helped to focus attention on the socio-cultural contexts of language and literary texts. His concepts of formal and dynamic equivalence remain useful and relevant even today.

Assignments

1. What are the four perspectives from which translation can be approached? Which, according to you, is the most balanced?
2. Evaluate the contribution made by Eugene Nida to the field of Translation Studies.

References

Gentzler, Edwin. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. Second revised edition. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001.
Nida, Eugene.”Theories of Translation”. < http://www.scribd.com/doc/49330223/Theories-of-E-Nida>

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