

## Module 6: Cultural turn in translation

### Lecture 21: Languages and the Politics of Translation in India

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## Introduction

The act of translation becomes even more of a socio-cultural issue in India where there is a multiplicity of languages. This is because all the languages are not equal in terms of its power, range of influence and usage. We have ancient languages like Tamil and tribal languages that do not even have a script, existing side by side. India is a country that does not speak one common language. Its established official language is not understood in various parts of the country, and ironically it is a foreign language like English that usually acts as the link language. English is not considered to be a foreign language, but another Indian language by most of the Indians today. This complicated linguistic

India has a complicated linguistic scenario—its official language is not even understood in various parts of the country, it has languages of varying ages existing side by side, and today it is linked together by the foreign language of English.

scenario is a good case study for the cultural aspects of translation. Why is it that most of the translation activity in regional Indian literatures takes place into English? If English is the receptor language, then does it indicate the interest that the English-speaking people have in Indian languages and literatures? Can we take the recent spurt in translations as reflective of a vibrant growth of Indian language literatures? Questions of this sort abound, but answers are difficult to come by. Before we attempt to answer them we have to understand the cultural complexities of the Indian language situation.

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## Languages

The Constitution of India recognizes 18 languages as scheduled languages; besides this, there are hundreds of languages that do not have this status, but are spoken extensively by communities. The officially recognized languages are those of a specific state or region, like Tamil (Tamil Nadu), Gujarati (Gujarat), Malayalam (Kerala), Kannada (Karnataka), Telugu (Andhra Pradesh) etc. They are the 'regional' languages. A regional language is also one that is spoken by people who are spread over one or two states. Urdu is an example of this – it is spoken in Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu Kashmir and many other states. According to the constitution of India, "The official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script". English is the second official language. Besides these are the countless oral languages that do not have a script, and go unrecognized by most people.

All these languages do not have the same importance or prestige. The government tries to maintain Hindi as the official language by trying to use it as the language for official purposes, propagating Hindi through official communiqués and notices, through Akashvani and Doordarshan etc. However English is the language that is more in use. Despite governmental efforts, official work and legal procedures are still in English. Newspapers or electronic media that claim to be national mostly use the English language. Higher education and production of all forms of knowledge are in English. The advent of the computer and the internet has only increased the importance of English in India. The skill of writing and speaking good English is seen as necessary for social advancement in India. It is the general assumption in India that a regional language like Hindi is a language of the past, while English is seen as the language of the future. Thus English tops the linguistic hierarchy and has a place that is similar to Sanskrit or Persian in the past.

Despite the multiplicity of Indian languages, English enjoys social prestige and is seen as a necessary skill to succeed in all domains of life in India.

## Linguistic Identity

Language is usually a very strong aspect of your identity, or the way in which you would define yourself. An Indian would most probably identify herself firstly as a Marathi speaker, Oriya speaker or Manipuri speaker. Language or the mother-tongue is thus very much a part of the regional identity. Rita Kothari in her book *Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English*, points out how the formation of these regional identities on the basis of language was initially a reaction to colonialism. The decision to go back to the mother-tongue as a way of resistance to the domination of the colonial ruler was a part of our nationalist movement. Kothari states: “Indians have traditionally perceived themselves as Oriyas or Gujaratis—an all-pervasive regional identity has always been the strongest. However, the sharpening of ‘regional consciousness’ that manifested itself through an affiliation with the ‘mother tongue’ was one of the reactions to colonialism. The perception that the ‘mother tongue’ best served as the community conduit had taken hold of a Bankimchandra in the nineteenth century, and a Gandhi in the twentieth” (27). Writers like Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Michael Madhusudan Dutt decided to stop their creative work in English and start writing in their native Bangla, in the interests of the nation and the nationalist movement. This identification along linguistic lines was further strengthened when India was reorganized along linguistic lines in 1950. This administrative move helped to strengthen the regional languages and their literatures. However, the relations between the Indian languages were not always smooth. The decision to make Hindi the official language was seen as an attempt to impose the language of the North on the non-Hindi speaking South. Tussles between speakers of different languages in the same state, like that of Konkani and Marathi in Maharashtra, also occurred. It is also a fact that not all Indian languages share the same power and prestige; some are more equal than others. For instance, Bengali and Marathi are primarily known for their vibrant literatures. There are more translations from Bengali into other Indian languages than in the reverse direction. A language / literature like Manipuri or Sindhi does not seem to have the same status as Bengali or Marathi.

The power hierarchy that is visible in the case of English and Indian languages is present within the Indian languages also. Some languages like Bengali enjoy greater prestige in terms of its literature and status.

## English and the Middle Class

The inequality among Indian languages is reflected on a larger scale in the relationship between English and Indian languages. The governmental efforts to promote Hindi as the official language are not supported by the realities of everyday life in India. English continues to be the language used in offices, courts of law, schools and colleges. English is needed to keep abreast of the latest developments in the fields of technology and science. Moreover, it is seen as a status symbol that is associated with a particular social class. Rita Kothari says: “By and large, both the elite and the middle class of India living in its metropolitan cities seem to emerge as the chief mainstay of the English language” (31). She argues that the middle class which is the chief patron of English in India has the power that goes into “shaping and moulding policies, markets and culture” (32). Consequently, the growth of the middle class is proportionate to the growth of English.



Another notable feature of this middle class is that it is metropolitan and very often displaced from its regional roots. This leads to the loss of its mother tongue. Kothari explains: “Children of linguistic communities settled in spots far from what used to be called ‘the native place’ can usually speak their ‘mother tongue’ but they seldom learn to read it. They acquire English, the ‘regional language’, and in most states, Hindi as well...” (50). These are the people who claim to be more fluent in English than in any Indian language. A writer like Shashi Tharoor is illustrative of this. Born of a Malayali father and Bengali mother, Tharoor's childhood was spent in the cities of Kolkata and Mumbai. He knows a smattering of Malayalam and Bengali, is fluent to a certain extent in Hindi, but is best in English. His cultural repertoire has been fed by a few regional sources, but he has admitted that he grew up on English books and English literature. English thus becomes the most natural language for expressing the creative urge in him; English, in his hands and other writers like him, becomes an Indian language. If Indian writers in English used to be apologetic about the ‘foreign’ language that they used, their modern counterparts are aggressively confident. Salman Rushdie notoriously claimed that Indian writing in English is the only literature that India produces, and that regional language literatures do not count at all.

English is also the language of aspiration, and is seen as an essential stepping stone to the upper ranges of society, as far as the upwardly mobile middle class is concerned. This has ensured the presence and dominance of English in Indian society at least for the present. English is seen as generating jobs even for the not-so well educated.

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**Bilingualism and Translation**

G. N. Devy maintains that India has always been bilingual, if not multilingual. Today most educated Indians know English and at least one other regional language. Kothari is of the view that “Advertisement captions, news media reports and articles, IWE [Indian Writing in English] and ILET [Indian Literature in English Translation] are only some manifestations of a profoundly contemporary Indian ethos that show today a greater simultaneity of Indian language and English...The cultural identity formed by English added to a layer of a ‘mother-tongue’ is the stuff of a contemporary urban middle class” (32 – 33).



However, we have already seen that English is the dominant language when considered in the all-India context. This is reflected in the translation field also. Regional language literatures are getting translated into English more than other Indian languages; in fact, it is believed that this has to be the case if these literatures have to get more readership and critical attention. A work translated into English ensures readership both in India and abroad, besides being shortlisted for prestigious awards like the Man Booker or Crossword prize. English is the receptor language in the case of Indian languages. According to translation theory, translation is usually done from a culturally superior language (‘donor’ language according to Kothari) to an inferior one. If one were to go with this assumption, English as a receptor language should be at a lower position in India than other Indian languages. It is a paradox that this is not the case in India. Translations into English are made to suit the English tastes (Indian and non-Indian) and the power dynamics is clear in this relationship. Translations are mostly into English because that assures the source text a wider readership and increased visibility.

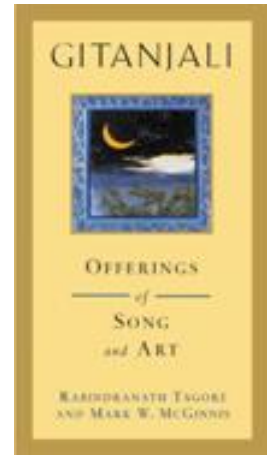
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**Tagore's *Gitanjali***

We have already seen the history of Rabindranath Tagore's translation of *Gitanjali* which is thought of as a landmark in the history of Indian literature in English translation. Tagore translated his works himself and many critics have pointed out the difference between Tagore the Bangla writer and Tagore in English translation. Sujit Mukherjee goes to the extent of calling Tagore's act of translation an act of perjury, as he tried to adjust his work to suit the tastes of the west (123). But the primary question is why Tagore decided to translate his works into English, especially when his compatriots were 'going native' in a bid to resist the colonizer. Sisir Kumar Das comments that Tagore launched his English translations to escape being "a mere Bengali poet" (qtd in Kothari 22). It is thought that his friends urged him to translate so that he could be known outside the realms of his native land. The reasons that prompted Tagore to translate into English seem to be valid even today for the regional Indian writer – to be known at the national level you have to be translated into English rather than any other Indian language.



The reception of the English *Gitanjali* is also revelatory. The English translation was actually a collection of verses and songs from *Gitanjali* and his other Bangla works *Naivedya*, *Kheya* and *Gitimalya*. . Mukherjee observes: "As songs their essential simplicity, of form as well as of content, was amenable to recapture' and 'receiving anew' and 'dressing it in other clothes' in English" (105). Writers like Edward Thompson and Victoria Ocampo have recorded that Tagore doubted the Westerners' capacity to understand Eastern thoughts, and had tailored his translations to accommodate their inclinations. The result was an English *Gitanjali* which was heavily inclined to the mystical aspect of poetry. Kothari points out the timing of the publication of this anthology in the west preceding the First World War. To the western world that was passing through an extremely troubled period, it seemed to embody the spirit of India . As Kothari points out, "The binary dichotomous view that India had spirituality while the West had rationalism was reinforced by the image of Tagore" (22). This image was a carefully cultivated one by the author himself with the result that the English *Gitanjali* "began to exist in a transcendental space, where it had no connection with other sides of Tagore's poetic and political career" (22).

This translation is thought of as a departure from the translation tradition that was extant in India. The activity of English translation begun by Sir William Jones with his *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, was an attempt to 'discover' India 's ancient cultural roots and showcase them to the west. This was an Orientalist enterprise that served to exoticize the country and create an image of an India that lived more in the past than in the present. Indian translators on the other hand, used translation as a tool to knit the country with

concepts of nationalism and the nation. Tagore neither had this motivation, nor the intention to correct the Orientalist stereotype perpetuated by the colonial overlords. Kothari observes: “Tagore engaged in English translation for personal recognition, not to intervene in the colonial understanding of ‘Indian culture’. As a matter of fact, Tagore's project looks back upon a period of spiritual and transcendental texts that characterize the British phase of translation, and effectively reinforces Orientalist versions of India” (23). This translation technique proved to be effective as it got him the recognition of the world in the form of the Nobel Prize in 1913.

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Tagore seems to have set the example for much of the translation of regional Indian literature into English today. Regional writing does not have the prestige of Indian writing in English. An M. T. Vasudevan Nair is not so well known as Chetan Bhagat, despite the obvious superiority of the former in terms of literary merit. The aspiration of most regional writers is to get translated into English, the motivation being the same as Tagore's more than a century back. But if we look at the history of translation into English, we find that it lacked the institutional support that independent India bestowed on translations into other Indian languages. Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust encouraged translations between Indian languages, but not into English.

One reason for the spurt of translations in to English is the desire to sell the product at the highest price in the global literary marketplace where the dominant language is English.

Very few publishers were willing to publish the English translations, and these lacked in quality. P. Lal's Writer's Workshop (established in 1958) was one of the pioneering publishing houses to encourage the publication of translations into English. UNESCO's publication of Representative Works also helped in the translation of a few Indian works into English. However the scene today is totally different. Macmillan, Penguin and Katha are but a prominent few who publish superior quality translations in English. These translations have managed to make their way to the shortlists of prestigious literary awards.

What is the reason for this change? It cannot surely be that regional Indian writing has gained in quality and is getting recognition for that. The spurt in the activity of translation into English is an indicator of a larger socio-cultural phenomenon which is globalization. The world is getting to be one large marketplace where the driving ideal is to sell at a profit. Currently the most selling 'product' in the literary marketplace is anything that caters to the west (primarily the Anglo-American world) in its own language. Hence the zeal that we see in translating and selling works in English.

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## Conclusion

This shows how translation is not a mere academic or scholarly exercise that connects two languages. It is also an exchange between two unequal forces and becomes the reflection of the complexity of the socio-cultural contexts in which they are rooted. This undercurrent of cultural tension that lies beneath the act of translation became a part of translation studies only after the 'cultural turn' occurred. Translation theorists today are sensitized to the tussle of power that is discernible in politically innocent activities like translation.

## Assignments

1. Evaluate the role played by your mother tongue in your daily activities in the workplace and domestic domains respectively. Which do you use more—English or the mother tongue?
2. How do the power dynamics between languages affect translation?

## References:

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