









Module 4: Theories of translation

Lecture 9: Early Translation Theories

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Introduction

The process of translation has been going on for years and many have expressed their views about it, starting with Horace and Quintilian. They were more concerned about meaning and the adequate representation of it in another language and also about the best method to adopt while translating. But as Translation Studies as a discipline and the theories associated with it evolved, the theoretical concerns also underwent a change. In the initial phase the focus was more on the process of translation and how it could be undertaken satisfactorily. The metaphysical preoccupation with meaning and whether it can be communicated came later. In the initial phase there was a coming together of multiple disciplines like literature, linguistics and philosophy. Translation was seen both as a literary activity as well as a non-literary one. Questions were asked about the mediation that occurs in the process of translation and also how translation affects both the source language and receptor language cultures. The attention gradually shifted to the text in translation. However there was a healthy disrespect for what is commonly perceived to be 'literary theory'; most of the leading figures in the field like Lefevere refused to impose theory on translation in the belief that whatever theory there has to be, has to evolve out of the practical concerns of translation as a process.

There are differing opinions about the theoretical component of the activity of translation – some believe that theory should evolve from the process of translation, while some others would like it to be closer to a science.

In fact this is a field where you have opposing viewpoints on what is perceived to be 'theory' – there are people who believe that translation is a practice-oriented activity and should not worry too much about theory and those who hold the view that it can be approached scientifically, avoiding subjective opinions and focusing on the linguistic aspect of translation. André Lefevere called these two positions hermeneutic and neopositivistic respectively. The hermeneutic approach is individualistic and non-scientific and is premised upon the concept of universally accepted ideas. The positivistic approach was scientific in that it was based upon the study of language and its structure, but it tended to reduce literature to another linguistic structure. Lefevere advocated the avoidance of both these extremes, and urged translation theorists to focus on “an evolutionary concept of metascience” (qtd in Gentzler 78) where translation can be seen as a separate discipline that existed independently on its own, even as it borrowed concepts from literature and linguistics.

Influence of Formalism

Edwin Gentzler in his book *Contemporary Translation Theories* has argued that the roots of translation theories lie in the Russian Formalist school. Russian Formalism refers to an early 20th century literary movement in Russia whose theoreticians believed that a literary text has to be considered by itself based on its intrinsic qualities. Naturally they concentrated on the aspects that went into the making of the text rather than the context out of which it arose, which meant that they were more interested in the structure of the text.

Translation theory's focus on the translated text similarly paid attention to structural aspects of language and grammar without the preoccupations with the intrinsic meaning or deep structure of a text.

Initially they also seemed to subscribe to the concept of 'defamiliarization' popularized by the Formalists. They believed that the literary quality of a text is determined by the language that it uses, and its ability to

'defamiliarize' – which is the ability to make even the most ordinary of events or things new by its special use of language. Early translation theory also believed in defamiliarization in that they did not take efforts to smoothen the translation by catering to TL readers.

Formalism with its focus on the text, was akin to translation that paid more attention to the source text that had to be translated, rather than the socio-cultural context in which it was written.

Elements of Formalism can be discerned in the American critical school of New Criticism propounded by I.A. Richards. His work *Practical Criticism* published in 1929, sought to dissociate the text from extraneous factors like the author and the times he wrote in; Richards believed that a text has an intrinsic meaning and there exists a set of criteria by which a reader can arrive at that meaning. This can be seen as somewhat similar to the belief in translation that there is a meaning hidden in a text that is waiting to be carried across. Richards's contribution to translation theory is his essay "Toward a Theory of Translating" published in 1953. By this time the notion of a stable text and unified meaning were being increasingly questioned. Yet he adhered to his primary belief by saying that a translator could arrive at the meaning of a text if s/he had his/her purpose clearly outlined. This premise appears naive and uninformed today, but it still is the guiding principle for most translators who believe that their task is to communicate meaning from one language to another and that it can be done, provided one understood what the 'real' meaning of that text is.

Czech and Slovak influence

Formalism and Richards were but influences on the evolution of translation theory when it was in the nascent stage. Gentzler considers a group of Czech and Slovak scholars who can be seen as providing the link between the early and later phases of translation theory. Two of them are Jiří Levý and Anton Popovic.



Jiří Levý

Jiří Levý (1926 – 1967) was a Czech theorist who is primarily known for his work *Literary Translation* published in 1963. He was influenced by the principles of Russian Formalism, but he went beyond them. He believed that the translation should succeed in producing the same effect in its receptor language culture as the SL text had in its own; in effect, the ‘literariness’ of a work of art should not be lost in translation. Like the Formalists, he too viewed the text as part of a semiotic network or a larger network of signifying systems. Language was seen as a code that followed certain rules in grouping. He also subscribed to Willard Quine's hypothesis of meaning which was that meaning can be arrived at through logical inference. Together this meant that Levy's concept of translation involved not just superficial code-changing but also interpretation. However, his focus was more on surface structure of language like stylistic features than meaning. His emphasis on the literariness of a work of art was basically attention to the style of a particular author. The problem was to identify what accounts for the literariness of a style. Roman Jakobson believed that poeticity or the poetic function is “an element sui generis, one that cannot be mechanically reduced to other elements...It can be separated out and made independent, like the various devices in, say a cubist painting...” (qtd in Gentzler 84). Levý agreed with this; in his concept of translation the literary component could be isolated and recoded in another language system.

Thus Levý's perspective was that the meaning of a literary work is constituted by language. This by itself is not a problem in a monolingual situation, but this acquires another dimension in the context of translation. Gentzler points out how the translated text can become ambiguous. The meaning that is constituted by one language need not be the same when it is transcribed in another language. The translated text thus becomes unstable; it is not “a unified work, but one that is full of tension and contradictions because the content is intertextually constructed, represented as it were by two perspectives simultaneously: from the view of the original language system and the second language system” (Gentzler 85).

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Anton Popovic

Popovic (1933 – 1984), a Slovak theorist, is known for the concept of ‘shifts’ that he introduced to translation theory. His perspective was more comprehensive in that he acknowledged the losses and gains that inhered in the translation process and analyzed the changes that occurred in the translated text. He defined shifts thus: “All that appears as new with respect to the original, or fails to appear where it might have been expected, may be interpreted as a shift” (qtd in Gentzler 88). Popovic was of the view that shifts occur because of cultural and linguistic differences. The translator perforce had to make compromises in translation because s/he was attempting to recapture something of the original in the translated text. These shifts have to be analysed for they tell a lot about the SL text as well as the translator and the process of translation. According to Popovic, what fell through the gaps in translation reveals the cultural context of the translated text. His theory, in addition to the focus on structural aspects, thus also had a cultural dimension to it as it underlined the mediated nature of the translation.



The drawback of the theories of Levý and Popovic, according to Gentzler, was this emphasis on structure rather than content. He points out that these theories might work well with modernist texts in which language plays a major role, but they might be inadequate to deal with older texts where language and linguistic elements alone did not make a work of art. Moreover, the emphasis on form rather than content could lead the way to a complete dissociation of the text from its socio-cultural moorings and thus lead to its consideration as an autonomous entity without reference to an external reality.

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James Holmes

James Holmes (1924 – 1986) was an American translation theorist of the early phase and he himself was a poet and translator. Dismissing the concept of equivalence he maintained that the referent of the translated work was not the same as that of the SL text but a linguistic formulation. He borrowed this idea from Roland Barthes who made a distinction between works (mostly literary) that describe an external world and works (like those in literary criticism) that comment about another work. A commentary on another piece of literature is what he means by a linguistic formulation. The language of the latter is “meta-language”; interpreted this way, translations too would come under the category of works that use meta-language. Holmes was specifically interested in verse translation. He argued that verse translation is a unique form of meta-language because the translated poem aspires to be a work of art in its own right. It is meta-literature because it comments upon another literary work but it is also generating a new literary work that invites critical comments. Translation thus has a dual purpose as “meta-literature and as primary literature” and the term that best suits a verse translation would be “metapoem” (qtd in Gentzler 92).

Holmes was one of the first to chalk out a comprehensive map for the scientific study of translation studies. He also popularized the name of 'translation studies'.

Thus there is a shift in focus from problems of equivalence. As Gentzler points out, what is analyzed are two things: the relation of the translated text to the SL text within the framework of the literary tradition of the source language and the relation of the SL text to the translated text within the framework of the receptor-language culture. Holmes was placing translation within specific contexts and attempting to look at them in a comprehensive manner. His major contribution is his essay “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” published in 1972 in which he outlined the scope of the relatively young area of translation studies. He demarcated the field into three broad areas: the descriptive branch where translations are described, the theoretical branch which explains the theories that inform the process of translation and the applied branch where the information gained from the former two branches is used for practical application. Holmes's concepts helped in the evolution of translation theories that concentrated more on the process of translation and the reception of the translated text in the target language.

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André Lefevere

We have already seen how important the Belgian theorist André Lefevere (1945 – 1996) was to the field of translation studies. Lefevere's *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* published in 1975 showed a pragmatic approach to the issue of translation. He took one poem as the source text – Catullus's sixty-fourth poem – and described seven different methods of translation. These have been mentioned briefly in a lecture before this; let us now look at them more deeply.

Lefevere's approach was pragmatic, and he outlined the methods that could be adopted in the process of translation.

- **Phonemic translation:** It tries to reproduce the sound of the SL in the TL, simultaneously attempting to capture the sense. This is effective in translating onomatopoeic words but can often become very awkward as the meaning gets lost in the process.
- **Literal translation:** Word-for-word translation that might distort the meaning as well as the stylistic aspects of the original.
- **Metrical translation:** Translation in which there is an attempt at metrical reproduction. Like literal translation, concentrating on the metre might result in distortion of sense and the overall qualities of the text as a whole.
- **Poetry into prose:** This can capture the sense, but the poetic qualities tend to get lost.
- **Rhymed translation:** The translation tries to retain the rhyme scheme and metre of the original. This can end up in very clumsy translation that does no justice to the source text.
- **Blank verse translation:** The restrictions imposed by metre can distort the text. But Lefevere also notes that this translation can achieve greater degree of accuracy.
- **Interpretation:** Lefevere discusses versions and imitations under this head. Versions are those in which the substance of the SL text is retained and the form is changed. Imitation is that in which the translator produces a poem that is only marginally related to the SL text. Both are receptor-friendly texts but they acquire that quality at the expense of the original text.

Lefevere himself preferred a translation that would impact the readers like the original with the SL

readers. He believed that the translator's task “is precisely to render the source text, the original author's interpretation of a given theme expressed in a number of variations, accessible to readers not familiar with these variations, by replacing the original author's variation with their equivalents in a different language, time place and tradition” (qtd in Gentzler 95).

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Susan Bassnett

Susan Bassnett's *Translation Studies* published in 1980 demonstrates the reception of the early scholars of the field. The book was and still is one of the best introductory works on the topic. Bassnett seems to agree with two concepts of the early theorists:



- There is no single correct way of translating a text
- The translation has to be based on the comparison of the SL text's function or purpose in its own context and the receptor-language context

Her approach is somewhat similar to the Russian Formalist concepts. She broadened the reader's concept about what a translation should be, but she essentially seemed to accept the Formalist idea of defamiliarization by which a translator could adopt 'foreign' terms and usages to preserve the impact of the original. She is also one of the earliest theorists to have taken to the cultural turn in Translation Studies, along with Lefevere.

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Evaluation of Theories

Taken as a whole, what is the contribution of these scholars to translation theory? Despite differences in approach, all of them were of the view that the translated text must be studied with reference to the source text in terms of similarities and differences. Unlike earlier writers on the subject, they tried to come up with objective criteria to analyze the translation process. They attempted to converge on certain stylistic features that could be isolated and compared. Their approach was a combination of the synchronic and diachronic approaches in that it studied the text in itself and also looked at the intertextual and socio-cultural aspects of the text. This demanded a lot of capability from the individual translator and seems an almost impossible ideal to expect. It is this realization that led to the collaboration of effort that we see in the field of translation studies today. Scholars from various fields like linguistics, literature and socio-cultural theory are active in the effort to evolve a systematic approach to the field.

Translation Studies today combines the synchronic and diachronic approaches to translation.

From this phase onwards, translation theory is more focused on the process of translation and we see a host of disparate fields coming together. Before this phase, writings on translation were described as 'intuitive' or they believed in the intuition of the translator to come up with an adequate translation. But the emergence of scholars like Lefevere and Holmes demanded a more systematic approach to translation. The cultural aspect that has been factored into translation studies today can also be traced back to these early scholars.

Assignments

1. What was the influence of Russian Formalism on Translation Studies?
2. In your opinion, which of these early theorists is most relevant today? Justify your answer.

Reference

Gentzler, Edwin. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. Second revised edition. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001.

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