Module 3: Central Issues in Translation

Lecture 7: Equivalence and Shifts

The Lecture Contains:

Previous Next

Introduction

"Isn't the act of translating necessarily a utopian task?" - Jose Ortegay Gasset.

Every translator is in quest of what seems to be the unattainable, which is perfect equivalence. This is the undercurrent of most of the translation theories before translation studies became a well-defined field. If translation is a means of carrying over meaning from one language to another and there is no perfect correlation between them, how can there ever be an effective translation? In the 20th century, post structuralism added to the confusion by generating a lot of debate about language and its communicability. Despite all these debates there is general consensus that languages are, if not completely, to some extent mutually comprehensible. Some, like Theodore Savory would attribute it to "an equivalence of thought that lies behind its [languages'] different verbal expressions" (*The Art of Translation* 13). He points to the universality of certain concepts that underlie our linguistic expressions. Anton Popovic calls this translatable portion as the 'invariant core' of literary works, an ingredient that can be salvaged in the linguistic process of translation.

The choice of how to achieve equivalence ultimately rests with the translator. It depends also on how s/he interprets or reads the SL text and decides to bridge the two languages. This is why Jirí Levý defines translation as a decision-making process. The translator has to decide at each juncture what the best possible alternative would be to a particularly vexatious phrase or idiom in the SL. The example he gives is the title of the famous Brecht play, The *Good Woman of Sechuan*. In the original German it is Der *Gute Mensch der Secuhuan*, where "*Mensch*" can be either man or woman; the feminine ending being the only indication that it is a woman. But the title cannot be translated as such to English as English does not have a satisfactory equivalent. ("Translation as a Decision Process", 148). The translator has to decide at this point what the best alternative could be.

.

Previous Next

Nida's concepts of equivalence

We have already briefly discussed Eugene Nida's two types of equivalence: formal and dynamic. Formal equivalence “focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content” “Principles of Correspondence” in (Venuti, 129). This would mean adherence to the SL text as closely as possible in terms of language and structure and also that the TL text would be constantly compared to the SL for accuracy. Nida points out that this translation can also be termed ‘gloss translation', because it would need extensive explanatory notes. The text would be translated literally, making it awkward at times. These texts are mainly academic in nature, possibly undertaken with the aim of introducing the culture and milieu of the SL text, as also its structural and semantic peculiarities. It is but natural that a text of this kind would require explanatory notes.

Dynamic equivalence is based upon “the principle of equivalent effect”. In this sort of translation the emphasis is on the “dynamic relationship” between message and receptor, and care is taken that “the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message” (129). Here the SL and TL texts are not compared for correspondence and the translator is under no obligation to reproduce the cultural underpinnings of the original. What the translator tries to do is to reproduce the text such that the TL reader can relate to it in a different cultural context. This does give considerable freedom to the translator as he is given a wider range. Catford terms such translations ‘free' as opposed to ‘literal' translations; Dagut goes even further and classifies them as ‘reproductions' rather than translations. Nida points out that there are a “number of intervening grades” between these two poles of translation. Recent trends in translation, however, seem to be inclined towards dynamic rather than formal equivalence.

Previous Next

Principles of equivalence

Nida also spells out the principles that govern formal and dynamic equivalences. Formal equivalence translation is source-oriented as it is intended to reveal the original text in its true context, to the farthest extent possible. It would naturally keep close to the original in the usage of words, grammatical units and meanings. It would attempt to retain even the punctuation marks. Such translations are of great help to specialists in the area but will not be appealing for the general reader.

> Translations that cater to readers in the receptor language will have dynamic equivalence, and will appear to be 'natural'.

If formal equivalence is source-oriented, dynamic equivalence pays attention to the receptor. Nida defines a dynamic equivalence (D-E) translation as "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message" (136). The term 'natural' will apply to three aspects of the process – the TL and culture, the context of the SL message and the TL readership. We call a translation 'natural' when it blends seamlessly with the receptor language and culture. This would mean that the translation would not have any alienating elements like unfamiliar sentence constructions etc. Natural translation calls for adjustments at the levels of grammar and lexicon. In the case of grammar, the adjustments might be that nouns would have to be substituted with verbs and so on. In the case of lexicon, the situation is more complex as the decision, as Jirí Levý points out, is to decide from multiple possibilities. The example that Nida gives is that of nouns like river for which there are plenty of synonyms. The translator's choice will depend on a host of factors that are socio-cultural as well as linguistic.

Despite such adjustments, Nida points out that no translation will be able to bridge the "cultural gap" between languages and remove all traces of a foreign setting. D-E translation is a matter of give and take in which loss and gain in translation are involved. The loss might be, in case of verse, in the rhythm and intonation whereas the gain might be in creating an unforeseen impact.

Previous Next

Albrecht Neubert

Neubert was of the view that translation equivalence should be seen as a semiotic category which consists of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic components. They are arranged hierarchically in order of importance – semantic equivalence gets top priority after which comes syntactic equivalence. Pragmatic equivalence modifies the other two. Neubert thinks of equivalence as a semiotic category because he believes that it is a result of the relation between signs or between signs and the ideas they stand for. Equivalence is also the effect of the relationship between signs, what they represent and the people who use them. The translator has to resort to pragmatic equivalence when s/he tries to reproduce certain custom-bound activities (like forms of address in letter-writing) or obscene swear words. Neubert essentially is underscoring the point that equivalence evolves from a dialectic relationship between signs and structures and is context and reader-dependent.

> According to Neubert, translation equivalence is part of a semiotic category because it is the result of the relationship between signs, or between signs and the ideas they stand for.

Previous Next

Anton Popovic

The four kinds of equivalence that Popovic talks of – linguistic, paradigmatic, stylistic and textual – are also essentially reader-oriented. Of these, linguistic equivalence or 'word for word' translation is not always possible and desirable. Much more than replacement of SL words with TL words, what translation aims at is 'expressive identity' between SL and TL texts. This means that the impact of the SL text has to be reproduced even though there might not be exact linguistic equivalence. In the translation of literature with its profusion of idioms and metaphors, what the translator would aim for is stylistic equivalence. However, there will be an overlap of all these kinds of equivalence in a good translation.

> The concept of equivalence as 'sameness' between source text and translation has undergone a change. Today it is interpreted in various ways.

Mukarovsky states that a literary text has an autonomous as well as communicative character – it is a complete entity in itself but it also has a message to communicate. Elaborating on the autonomous nature of a text, Lotman has argued that it is explicit, limited and has structure. It is explicit because it is expressed through definite signs, limited because it begins and ends at specific points and it has a structure because it has internal organization. Susan Bassett points out how it is important for a translator to take all of this into account before translating. S/he has to consider the text not just as an autonomous entity but also as a medium of communication; otherwise the translation would not do justice to the SL text.

The issue of equivalence has evolved and grown with the discipline of Translation Studies. There are multiple approaches to the question. One line of thought insists on semantic equivalence in the belief that translation is transfer of meanings from one language to the other. However, changing concepts of language and literature have radically altered the perception of equivalence especially with regard to literary translations. The question they ask is whether equivalence is a realizable goal or not. A translation that hopes to capture a text's essence will have to take into account its socio-cultural context also; a theoretician like Durisin feels it has to be concerned about the equivalence between artistic procedures rather than languages. There are people who feel that the equivalence that is talked about in Translation Studies should not be thought of as a mathematical precept, and that equivalence can never be 'sameness' between SL and TL texts.

Previous Next

Direct and Oblique translation

Jean Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet in the 1950s, wrote a seminal work that became very important for the practitioners of translation. They came up with seven methods of translation and as many ways to attain equivalence. They observed: “Equivalence of messages ultimately relies upon an identity of situations, and it is this alone that allows us to state that the TL may retain certain characteristics of reality that are unknown to the SL” (Venuti 87). Their view was that if literal translation or direct translation was impossible, then the translator would have to resort to what they termed oblique translation. Oblique translation is another term for free translation where the translator exercises his/her freedom to attain equivalence; this might perhaps result in what Catford terms ‘shifts'.

Direct or literal translation “is the direct transfer of a SL text into a grammatically and idiomatically appropriate TL text in which the translator's task is limited to observing the adherence to the linguistic servitudes of the TL” (Venuti 86). This naturally means that the translator has to operate within certain limits and is not free to appropriate the language to suit his/her ends. When does a direct translation fail? According to Vinay and Darbelnet it fails when the TL translation fails to convey anything meaningful for various reasons. It might not have the exact structural equivalent or might not have a corresponding expression. Idioms are the best examples of this. “It is raining cats and dogs” in English cannot be translated literally into Hindi or most Indian languages, for that matter.

In cases like these the translator will have to resort to oblique translation. Here the translator has to fall back on “identity of situations” or aim for an approximately accurate replication of the impact of the SL text. Vinay and Darbelnet are of the view that the translator has to keep in mind the totality of the message that is to be communicated and exercise her/his judgement in the method of translation A translator might sometimes choose to borrow a certain expression or saying from one language . This results in what is termed in linguistics as calque, or a literal, word-for-word translation. However, Vinay and Darbelnet caution: “But the responsibility of introducing such calques into a perfectly organised language should not fall upon the shoulders of translators: only writers can take such liberties, and they alone should take credit or blame for success or failure” (“A Methodology for Translation”, 90).. Ultimately, they point out, it is the message alone that can help us to judge if the translation has attained equivalence.

“A calque is a special kind of borrowing whereby a language borrows an expression form of another, but then translates literally each of its elements” - Vinay & Darbelnet.

Previous Next

Domestication and Foreignization

It is worthwhile in this context to consider Lawrence Venuti's concepts of ‘domestication' and ‘foreignization' in translation. What the translator does through a free translation is to make the SL text palatable to the TL reader or ‘domesticate' the text by or adding elements so that the text will not look alien to the reader. The opposite of this would be ‘foreignization' where a text is not manipulated to suit TL readership. It retains its ‘foreignness' of content or sentence structures; this is somewhat like Schleiermacher's method where the thorny road between the text and the reader is not smoothed out for easy movement. The reader is forced to adjust to the foreignness of the text. Venuti argues that translations of texts into English tend to be domesticated because of the unequal power dynamics that exist between the Anglo-American English speaking world and the other countries where English is not the language of daily life. However, these texts tend to retain their foreignness when translated into languages other than English, which can also be interpreted as a measure of the lack of confidence of those languages.

> A text translated into English from other languages is usually ‘domesticated' because English enjoys a position of power with respect to other languages in the world today. The Anglo-American reader responds better to works that are attuned to her culture.

Previous Next

Shifts

In the attempt to attain equivalence, there occurs what Catford defines as ‘shifts' o“departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL (source language) to the TL (target language)” (Venuti 141). In other words, the changes that the translation undergoes in its attempt to attain equivalence with the SL text can be called shifts. Catford identifies two types of shifts – level shifts and category shifts.

The changes that occur at various linguistic levels in the process of translation from one language to other, are called shifts.

Level shifts occur when one word at a particular linguistic level has an equivalent at a different level. A noun in the SL might not be replaceable with a noun in the TL because that particular word is awkward or wrong in the TL context. For example, the simple English sentence, “It is morning” (indicating the time of day) cannot be replaced exactly in Hindi or most Indian languages. We need to rephrase it to clarify the meaning.

Category shifts are the changes brought about in the various parts of a text, viz. sentences, clauses, groups of words etc. Here Catford makes a distinction between unbounded and rank-bound translation. What is intended by ‘rank' are the different levels of the text, from sentence to morphemes. Unbounded translation is free and the equivalence between SL and TL is set up at whatever rank that is suitable for the translation. Rank-bound translation takes place when equivalence is sought to be attained at levels lower than the sentence; shifts that occur at this level result in bad translations as the TL text will not be an easy read. Structure shifts take place because there are no structural correspondences between two languages. Shifts also occur at various other levels.

Shoshana Blum-Kulka talks about shifts of cohesion and coherence that can occur in translation. Borrowing terms from discourse analysis, she defines coherence as “a covert potential meaning relationship among parts of a text, made overt by the reader or listener through processes of interpretation” and cohesion as “an overt relationship holding parts of the text, expressed by language specific markers” (Venuti 299). Her argument is that translation is sometimes “explicitation” or it augments the cohesiveness by repetition or explanation. The translation sometimes alters the semantic pattern of the SL text, perhaps due to reader response or the contextual factors surrounding the TL text resulting in shift of coherence.

Conclusion

This discussion about shifts and equivalence continue even in contemporary translation theories. Equivalence can also be seen as the ultimate goal of a translation. Jose Ortega y Gasset calls this the “misery” of translation which he calls essentially a “utopian task” (Venuti 49). Gasset terms it utopian because “each language is a different equation of statements and silences” and cannot hope to attain perfect equivalence (57) But, as is shown by the multiplicity of translations and translators, the quest continues to attain that chimerical state of perfect equivalence.

Assignments

1.What are the various ways in which equivalence can be attained?

2. Select a text in your mother-tongue and translate it into another language. Which method would you adopt to attain equivalence and why?

References

Catford, J. C. “Translation Shifts”. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000: 141 – 148.

Gasset, Jose Ortega y. “The Misery and Splendor of Translation”. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000: 49 – 65.

Nida, Eugene. “Principles of Correspondence”. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000: 126 – 141.

Vinay, Jean Paul and Jean Darbelnet. “A Methodology for Translation”. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000: 84 – 95.

Previous Next