









## Module 7: Role of the Translator

### Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

#### The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  Fluency
-  John Denham
-  Denham's translation strategy
-  Nott and Lamb
-  Foreignization
-  Newman and Arnold
-  Conclusion

 **Previous**   **Next** 

## Module 7: Role of the Translator

### Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

#### Introduction

Translations, like the literature in any language, are also rooted in the particular socio-cultural context in which they are engendered. The choice of text to be translated, the translation strategy used, the purpose of translation – all are determined by the circumstances in which a translation is born. Another factor that plays an important role is the ideology of the translator herself. So, like literary trends, the dominant trends in translation practice can be linked to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are produced. Lawrence Venuti who discussed the ‘invisibility’ of the translator in Anglo-American culture has also discussed the various translation strategies that are used by translators at different points of time. He points out that the emphasis on fluency and transparent discourse are products of the dominant discourse of the times, which is a fact that most mainstream histories of translation would not mention. His argument is that the impulse to translate smoothly hides the desire to build up and preserve a ‘nationalist’ literature that is homogeneous and tends to downplay pluralities. Some of the questions that Venuti asks are: “What domestic values has transparent discourse at once inscribed and masked in foreign texts during its long domination? How has transparency shaped the canon of foreign literatures in English and the cultural identities of English-language nations?” (*The Translator’s Invisibility* 40). What Venuti is essentially doing is pointing out the strong connection that the translator has with the prevailing discourse of the times in which he writes, and how it influences the way in which he translates.

The translator’s ideology plays a crucial role in the choice of text to be translated, as well as the translation strategy to be used.

Venuti’s concepts of domestication and foreignization in translation form the basis of his argument. Domestication or adapting the source text to the target language readership ensures fluency. Foreignization or retaining the essential foreign qualities of the source text in the translation, allows the reader to understand the flavor of the original source text, but this would be at the cost of fluency. Venuti points out that these strategies have been used by translators at various points of time, not without a reason. An analysis of these strategies in the contexts they have been used will yield an alternative history of translation.

## Fluency

Venuti observes that fluency as a pre-requisite for good translation is closely linked to prevalent socio-cultural factors: “Fluency emerges in English-language translation during the early modern period, a feature of aristocratic literary culture in seventeenth-century England, and over the next two hundred years it is valued for diverse reasons, cultural and social, in accordance with the vicissitudes of the hegemonic classes” (43). The emphasis on fluency is not seen as a coincidence but a strategy that was consciously or unconsciously meant to preserve the status quo as far as culture and social mores were concerned. Translation practices were based on the values that were cherished by the aristocratic elites which constituted the dominant class of the day. The social system underwent changes after that, but the concept of fluency dominates translation practices even to this day. An understanding of the socio-cultural milieu of those days is necessary to understand how this concept evolved and flourished. It meant that foreign texts that were translated into English catered to English speaking readers, glossing over the fact that the source text was culturally and linguistically different. This enforced homogeneity became a mask for differences of any sort, encouraging readers to expect differences to assimilate themselves to the main language.

“The dominance of fluency in English-language translation until today has led to the forgetting of [these] conditions and exclusions, requiring their recovery to intervene against the contemporary phase of this dominance.” --Venuti

## Module 7: Role of the Translator

## Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

**John Denham**

The example that Venuti gives to illustrate the rise of the concept of fluency is Sir John Denham's. Denham was a translator in the seventeenth century and lived through the Caroline and Commonwealth eras of British history. In 1656 he published a translation titled *The Destruction of Troy, An Essay upon the Second Book of Virgils Aeneis. Written in the year 1636*. What was significant about this book was that it did not carry the name of the author, unlike books of those days and even today. Why did Denham omit to mention his name on the title page? According to Venuti, the reasons are many. It could have been sheer humility, or a tacit admission that this work was not really significant but was a mere literary pastime. People who really worked, in accordance with the belief of those times, worked for the king either in the court or the army. Denham did neither of these things. Venuti interprets Denham's title page as a "distinctively aristocratic gesture in literary translation, typical of court culture in the Tudor and Stuart periods..." (44).

Denham's translation is indicative of the influence of socio-political factors on him as a person and as a translator.

What is more significant is the time period that has elapsed between the writing of the book and its publication. Denham specified that he had written it in 1636 and published it only in 1656. What happened in between? In 1636 Denham was a young apprentice lawyer who also dabbled in literary pursuits like translation. Charles I was on the throne of England. Denham was a royalist and also a follower of the literary fashions of the day. The ousting of the King and his eventual execution by the Parliament was to have consequences for Denham too. He was exiled to France, and later arrested for being part of a plot to overthrow Puritan rule. By 1656, he was a tried and tested royalist, as well as author of his best known work *Cooper's Hill*. Politically, this was the period known as Interregnum in British history when Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate was ruling England. This was to end in 1660 with the restoration of Charles II to the throne.

Venuti observes that Denham's gesture of mentioning the year in his translation of Virgil gains in significance, given the circumstances in which it was published. It is openly looking back to a past in which royalty was unchallenged. He also makes it clear in his preface that one of the aims of the work was to introduce a new translation aesthetics which could be picked up by future generations of aristocrats. His aristocratic leanings were not concealed; on the contrary, it was advertised along with the book in the leading journals of the time.

**Denham's translation strategy**

Venuti points out that Denham's translation strategy was not new. He was in fact following the Horatian concept that translators, if they are also poets, should create and not translate word for word. Denham was only consolidating a translation method that was part of an aristocratic literary culture. In 1656, it appeared new because it was harking back to the translation methods of a past of hegemonic royalty. Denham advocated free translation, but he wished to infuse it with a "new spirit" (qtd in Venuti 49). The new spirit is the domestication that he brought into the practice of translation, by which Virgil reads like an Englishman and not like a foreign author: "as speech is the apparel of our thoughts, so are there certain Garbs and Modes of speaking, which vary with the times... and therefore if Virgil must needs speak English, it were fit that he should speak not only as a man of this Nation, but as a man of this age" (qtd in Venuti 50). This decision to make Virgil an Englishman is in keeping with the nationalism of Denham. So is his decision to steer clear of burlesque versions of Virgil that were popular in Europe in those days. Denham's translation was an answer to a very typical English problem: "the need for a 'new' cultural practice that will enable the defeated royalist segment of the Caroline aristocracy to regain its hegemonic status in English culture" (Venuti 51). Moreover, in choosing to translate Virgil, Denham was joining the elite club of translators who chose to translate the classics. Thus Denham was the magnet around which the neoclassical tradition of translation – which emphasized fluency above everything else – followed by Dryden and Pope, consolidated.

"Denham consolidated the several decades long emergence of a neoclassical translation method in aristocratic literary culture."– Venuti

## Module 7: Role of the Translator

## Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

**Nott and Lamb**

To exemplify his theory further, Venuti compares two English translations of Catullus – one by Dr. John Nott in 1795 and another by Honourable George Lamb in 1821. Comparing these two translations, Venuti is pointing to the differences between the two and the prevalent socio-cultural factors that influenced them. Nott's translation was not smooth as he decided to retain the awkward syntax and coarse expressions used by Catullus in the original. Lamb, on the other hand, Anglicised the source text and edited out all the terms and references that his contemporaries would have thought obscene. Lamb's Catullus therefore was more decorous and pleasant to read than Nott's. What makes for this difference?

The differences in the translations of Nott and Lamb are not due to the years that separate the two, as the time lag is not great. The reason for this lies in the different social backgrounds of the two translators.

The reasons will be found in the backgrounds of the two translators. We cannot attribute the differences to the different time periods of composition, as there is not a significant time lag between the two. The difference is between the social circumstances of the two translators. Nott who was a physician was a member of aristocratic elite circles whose sense of morality was different from that of the middle class. He saw no reason to cater to the middle class—in fact, he might have wanted to stress the difference by his complete and unedited translation of Catullus. It was a gesture of defiance against middle class bourgeois morality while Lamb's domestication was an attempt at strengthening exactly those values.

Unsurprisingly Nott's translation was criticized by contemporary literary journals for being too explicit and offensive. Lamb was also an aristocrat by birth, but English conservatism of the times encouraged moral hypocrisy. The movement towards moral reform also resulted in the censorship of so-called obscenities in authors like Shakespeare. Lamb's decision to omit the obscenities from Catullus and ensure a smooth translation was appreciated by critics and readers alike. Venuti attributes Lamb's translational gesture as one of “social superiority by a member of the hegemonic class” (97). Translation becomes another factor that goes into the making of dominant culture, at any given point of time. This is why Venuti argues that “Fluent, domesticating translation was valorized in accordance with bourgeois moral and literary values...” (98).

## Module 7: Role of the Translator

### Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

#### Foreignization

Venuti shows an example of how foreignization too can be part of a nationalist strategy that aids in the building up of a national culture. The example he gives is of Friedrich Schleiermacher the German translation theorist. He “viewed translation as an important practice in the Prussian nationalist movement: it could enrich the German language by developing an elite literature and thus enable German culture to realize its historical destiny of global domination” (99). Thus Schleiermacher’s decision to foreignize is motivated by similar feelings that Lamb had in his domesticating mission.

Schleiermacher believed that a translator should bring the target language reader to the source text by creating the same effect that the source text had on its readers. This would mean that the text retained its essential ‘foreignness’ even in translation. It might seem as if this is a respectful gesture towards foreign cultures and languages, but Venuti points out how it is essentially ethnocentric, or catering to the target language values. This is because, as Venuti puts it, the translation decides to preserve the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, “but only as it is perceived in the translation by a limited readership, an educated elite” (101). So the translation, even when it is foreignized, does not quite escape the cultural hierarchy of the target language. Foreignizing then becomes a very elitist strategy with only the educated class being able to recognize the foreignized elements of the translation. This was actually Schleiermacher’s agenda, that “an educated elite controls the formation of a national culture by refining its language through foreignizing translations” (102). He was pitching for an elite culture as against that of the middle and working classes.

According to Schleiermacher, the translator is a writer who “would like to bring the latter [the reader] to an understanding and enjoyment of the former [the author] as correct and complete as possible without inviting him to leave the sphere of his mother tongue.”

◀ Previous   Next ▶

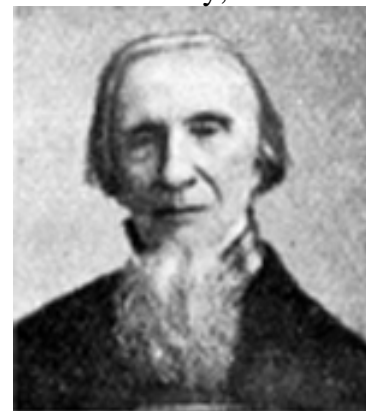


## Module 7: Role of the Translator

## Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

**Newman and Arnold**

Venuti gives another example of the foreignizing strategy in an Englishman of the 19th century, which is Francis Newman (1805 – 1897). Newman was the brother of the famous educationist Cardinal Newman, and was a classical scholar. As a translator he challenged the fluency concept in English translation, and was one of the first among the Victorians to advocate foreignizing in translation. Newman was essentially a rebel who did not subscribe to many of the prevailing beliefs of his day. He advocated women's suffrage, abolition of slavery, decentralized government, and criticized colonialism. He was a liberalist and this was reflected in his translation projects as well. His translations, unlike



Schleiermacher's, were meant for the ordinary person who was not a classical scholar. But Newman advocated a translation method that would assert the differences between the source and target language texts, preferring a style that would reflect the archaism, if any, of the source text and went against the concept of fluency. But he was not concerned about historical accuracy in the matter of recreating the archaic style, which resulted in an “artificially constructed archaism” (123).

Predictably, reviewers were not happy with Newman's translations, mainly because they felt that they were “un-English” (127). They felt it made too many demands on the ordinary reader who was used to the English traditions of writing. The person who was very unhappy about Newman's technique was Matthew Arnold the poet and critic. He attacked Newman's translation of the *Iliad* in a lecture series delivered in 1861, titled “On *Translating Homer*”. Arnold did not agree with Newman's principles at all. He wanted “translation to transcend, rather than signify, linguistic and cultural differences, and so he prized the illusionism of transparent discourse...” (129). He was of the view that there should be complete identification with the original text, and that the translator should not allow the current English methods to defile Homer. Venuti underlines the Christian Platonic metaphysics of Arnold who believed in complete semantic equivalence. Arnold felt that only those who were scholars in Greek literature were qualified to comment upon the worth of a translation of Homer, and objected to the ballad metre used by Newman for his translation. Arnold comes across as an academic who was opposed to populism of any sort. This is not surprising because Arnold was in favour of ‘high culture’ as opposed to what he described as English philistinism. In some ways Arnold resembles Schleiermacher who wished to build up an elitist culture in Germany through foreignizing translations. Venuti observes: “Translation for Arnold was a means to empower an academic elite, to endow it with national cultural authority, but this empowerment involved an imposition of scholarly values on other cultural constituencies – including the diverse English-reading audience that Newman hoped to reach” (132). Venuti interprets Arnold's opposition to Newman as “an academic repression of popular cultural forms that was grounded in a competing reading of Homer” (132).



 **Previous**    **Next** 

## Conclusion

These are but a few instances of a cultural reading of the practice of translation. It is valuable because it adopts a comprehensive view of translation by locating it in the contexts in which it is produced and in the personality of the translator. It dispels the notion that translations are merely exercises in language, without any political or cultural agenda. Venuti is essentially pointing out that all translations are acts of “ethnocentric violence” (22) perpetrated on the source text, in that they cater to the values of the target culture alone. This of course is a debatable point, but it definitely provokes thought about the practice of translation especially in the contemporary world that is bedeviled by competing languages and cultures. It also has to be remembered that Venuti is basing himself almost exclusively on the Anglo-American translation culture. We need to think about its relevance in the Indian context.

 **Previous**    **Next** 

## Module 7: Role of the Translator

### Lecture 26: Strategies of Translation and Cultural Contexts

#### Assignments

1. How can acts of translation be linked to socio-cultural agendas of the translators or the times and cultures they live in?
2. Can you think of an analogous trend in translation in your cultural environment that can be related to contemporary discourses?

#### Reference

Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A history of translation*. London: Routledge, 1995.  
Rpt.1999.

 **Previous**   **Next** 