








## The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  What is translation?
-  Types of translation
-  Equivalence
-  Lost in Translation
-  Translatability
-  Cultural Turn in Translation

 **Previous**   **Next** 

## Module 2: Introduction to Translation Studies as a discipline

### Lecture 4: Basic Concepts and Terminology of Translation Studies

#### Introduction

Translation Studies is now recognized as a discipline in its own right and like all other disciplines, it has its own set of terms to denote various aspects of the process. We have already seen how the language from which a text is translated is called the Source Language (SL) and the language into which it is translated is called the Target Language (TL).

 **Previous**   **Next** 

## What is translation?

Etymologically, ‘translate’ means to carry across. In context, it could mean carrying across a message or a text. It has also been defined as a process of communication that involves a sender and a receiver. Like any other form of communication, the sender sends a message that is coded in a certain way. This code is received and analyzed or decoded by the receiver before it is understood. Katharina Reiss has defined translation

as a “bilingual mediated process of communication, which ordinarily aims at the production of a TL text that is functionally equivalent to an SL text (2 media: SL and TL+1 medium: the translator, who becomes a secondary sender; thus translating: secondary communication)” (Venuti 160). In other words, translation is a process of communication that involves two languages and in which the translator acts as a mediator. Since the translator is the one who is originally sending the message s/he becomes a ‘secondary sender’ and therefore translation becomes ‘secondary communication’. Thus, translation also goes through many stages before its conclusion. According to Eugene Nida the SL message undergoes analysis by the translator before it is transferred to the TL. It is then restructured according to the TL pattern before it is comprehended. In other words, a message is first decoded by the receiver and then recoded by him/her.

“In translation, there is substitution of TL meanings for SL meanings: not transference of TL meanings into the SL” – J. C. Catford

◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Module 2: Introduction to Translation Studies as a discipline

## Lecture 4: Basic Concepts and Terminology of Translation Studies

The problem with all forms of communication including translation is that breakdowns might occur in the course of reception of the message. Even in same language communication, there is no guarantee that the receiver decodes the sender's message in the way s/he had intended. This is true of translation also; in fact, chances of miscommunication are higher as the sender's and receiver's codes are different and also because it is mediated through a third figure of the translator. This is why there is the assumption that there is "loss" in the translation process, that complete equivalence is impossible.

The cultural differences between sender and receiver also complicate matters. Susan Bassnett gives an example of how complicated the translation of even ordinary prosaic words can become. The ordinary affirmative 'yes' in English can become '*ja*' in German, '*si*' in Italian and '*si*' or '*oui*' in French. The choice of words in French becomes a problem. While '*oui*' is the common term used, '*si*' is used especially when there is disagreement of some sorts. There is also the culturally specific manner of repeating the affirmative in all the three languages: *ja ja* or *si si*. But repeating the affirmative in English (yes, yes) is very uncharacteristic of the English people as a whole. The good translator has to be aware of all of these minute cultural differences even before starting off on the process of translating even a simple word like 'yes' (Bassnett, 16-17).

The complicated process that goes into the translation of 'yes' into French, according to the Nida model is this:

- a) The sender's message (code) is 'yes'
- b) This is analysed (decoded) by the receiver
- c) The context in which the message is sent is taken into account and then recoded
- d) The recoded message of '*oui*' or '*si*'

What happens here, according to Roman Jakobson, is interlingual transposition, or substitution of one language with another language. Another theorist A. Ludskanov terms it 'semiotic transformation': "Semiotic transformations are the replacements of the signs encoding a message by signs of another code, preserving (so far as possible in the face of entropy) invariant information with respect to a given system of reference" (qtd in Bassnett 18). The invariant information in the above given situation would be that of the affirmative 'yes'; so, according to Ludskanov, the sign 'yes' is replaced by '*oui*' or '*si*' depending on the system of reference which is the social context of France.

## Types of translation

In his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” Roman Jakobson arrived at three forms of translation



*Roman Jakobson*

- Intralingual translation: Translation within a language which would involve explaining it in words of the same language
- Interlingual translation: Translation from one language into another or reinterpretation of the message in another linguistic code
- Intersemiotic translation: Translation from one linguistic system to another which means the transference of meaning from a verbal to a non-verbal system or from one medium to another

Jakobson points out how difficult it is to achieve complete equivalence because of the complexity of the codes involved. Even in intralingual translation we have to make use of combination of code units to interpret meaning. So even synonyms cannot guarantee full equivalence. This becomes complicated when the SL and TL are different. In addition to the difference between two language systems, cultural differences also pose huge barriers to translation activity. Eugene Nida says: “Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations” (Venuti 126).

◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Equivalence

This debate of a fully exact translation or equivalence is the most prevalent one in the field even today. Since all translations are inevitably reader-oriented or listener-oriented, equivalence becomes very important.

Ultimately the SL text should make sense for the TL reader/listener and for that the translator has to take into account all or more of the factors that we have already discussed.

Equivalence or similarity in meaning between the SL and TL texts, and how to achieve it, are major concerns in translation.

Idiomatic language becomes another knotty issue in translation. Idioms in any language are rooted in the cultural/social milieu of the community and will be difficult to relocate to a completely different soil. For example it will be practically impossible to translate ‘the apple of my eye’ into any Indian language. Of course it can be done literally by substituting the exact Hindi words for the English ones, but it would completely baffle the Hindi reader who has no idea of the English original. It is clear then, that translation means much more than substitution of one set of lexical and grammatical terms with another.

In fact, Anton Popovič identifies four types of equivalence in translation:

- i) Linguistic equivalence: Similarity between words of the SL and TL. This occurs in ‘word for word’ translation
- ii) Paradigmatic equivalence: Similarity between grammatical components
- iii) Stylistic equivalence: Similarity in the meaning or impact of the expressed text/message
- iv) Textual (syntagmatic) equivalence: Similarity in the structure and form of the texts

When it comes to idioms and metaphors, the translator will have to aim for stylistic equivalence where, according to Popovič, there is “functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation” (qtd by Bassnett 25).

Eugene Nida categorizes equivalence into two—formal and dynamic. In formal equivalence there is complete correspondence between the two texts in terms of structure and content, and it will try to convey as much about the SL text as is possible. A faithful translation would be characterized by formal equivalence. Dynamic

equivalence aims at creating a similar impact as the SL text on its readers or to recreate a similar relationship between the reader/listener and the text. Both forms of equivalence have their pros and cons, and are relevant according to the contexts of translation.

 **Previous**   **Next** 

## Lost in Translation

Along with the concept of equivalence is the notion of loss and gain in translation. Implicit in most of translation theories is the assumption that something is lost when you carry across a text from one language into another. There is always the possibility of miscommunication in the act of communication that is translation; if the receiver goes slightly askew in the decoding, the chances are that the message will not be carried across correctly. Certain elements can be added or left out. In fact, Robert Frost's famous definition of poetry is notable: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation". The basis of Frost's statement is the concept of the creative originality of the poet who creates a work where the meaning lurks somewhere beneath the surface of words. The translator, it is assumed, cannot ever hope to capture the 'meaning' of the original SL which tends to fall through the gaps of the TL. Overenthusiastic translators can also inadvertently pad up the text by adding more to it than is necessary with the result that the translation might have more allusions in it than was originally thought of.



The problem of loss and gain is again due to the cultural dissimilarity between two linguistic groups. Something that is very common in a particular community might be rare in another. It is said that the language of the Eskimos has more than one hundred words to describe 'snow'. These subtle distinctions they make between various types of snow cannot be brought out in a single Hindi word. The reverse is also applicable. For instance, the word 'godhuli' in Hindi cannot be translated with the help of a single English word. It needs to be explained as the 'hour at which the cattle return home causing the dust to rise by their hooves'. There is of course the word 'dusk' but that becomes only an approximation; what is lost here is the suggestion of Indian village life where dusk is the holy time when cattle return home and lamps are lit. Here there is loss in translation.

This is one of the major challenges facing a translator who is translating a literary work. Literary language, besides being informative and factual, is also allusive and elliptical. The translator has to be vigilant to these resonances in the SL text and attempt to recapture it for the TL reader as best as s/he can, without any palpable loss or gain in the process.

◀ Previous    Next ▶



## Translatability

Sometimes it is not just cultural differences that pose hurdles for translation activity. It could be a grammatical construction that becomes the problem. For example the Hindi “Yahaan ka mahaul achcha hain” cannot be translated using the same word order in English. If we do so it would become “Here’s atmosphere is good” which is wrong in English. To have the correct English equivalent we use “The atmosphere here is good”. Similarly “Aap ka shubh naam” often gets converted to “your good name” in English. These gaps in translation often have (unintentional) hilarious results. Be on the lookout for such gaffes the next time you watch a movie or song in your mother tongue with English subtitles!

J. C. Catford identifies two types of untranslatability – linguistic and cultural. Linguistic untranslatability occurs when there are no grammatical or syntactic equivalents in the TL. Cultural differences pave the way for cultural untranslatability. Popović also differentiates between two types of problems. The first is: “A situation in which the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced adequately in structural, linear, functional or semantic terms in consequence of a lack of denotation or connotation”. The other is a situation “where the relation of expressing the meaning i.e. the relation between the creative subject and its linguistic expression in the original does not find an adequate linguistic expression in the translation” (qtd in Bassnett 34). The examples given above illustrate these problems.

Does this mean that translation is an impossibility? This is not so. Georges Mounin, a French linguist felt that dwelling on the problems of untranslatability will not yield any positive results. According to him, there are certain areas of personal experience that are basically beyond translation. This is because each individual’s private domain is exclusively her/his own and anything, especially literature, that deals with it is also bound to be individualistic and might not yield to recapturing of its essence. Problems in translation also occur because of fundamental differences between two language systems that differ in their very basic sense. For example, it will be more difficult to translate from English (an Indo-European language) into Malayalam (a Dravidian language) because they differ in all linguistic aspects. But Mounin believed that communication through translation is possible if we try to understand it in context. He points out that the starting point of any translation should be clear and concrete. Translation involves “the consideration of a language in its entirety, together with its most subjective messages, through an examination of common situations and a multiplication of contacts that need clarifying” (Bassnett 36). Translation would

imply comprehensive consideration of both source and target languages, and an evaluation of how the SL text can best be reproduced in the TL. This would mean that a completely successful communication through translation is impossible. But this also proves that some form of communication is not impossible either.

When we come to the problem of translatability and the fine hairsplitting that go with it, we have to pause and remember a few basic facts.



◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Module 2: Introduction to Translation Studies as a discipline

## Lecture 4: Basic Concepts and Terminology of Translation Studies

If translatability is such a problem and complete equivalence is an impossibility, how have we understood important texts that have influenced us profoundly? Jesus Christ spoke in Aramaic and the Bible was originally in Hebrew. Most believers know Him and His Word only in their own language versions which are not heretical beliefs. Most of us have read world classics like *War and Peace*, *Don Quixote* and *Les Misérables* only in translation. This does not seem to have affected our appreciation and deep regard for these works. So the notion of breakdown of communication in translation activity is not borne out practically.



The problems that are identified theoretically can have pragmatic solutions. This is why Jiri Levy advises translators to fall back on intuition when faced with problems in translation: “Translation theory tends to be normative, to instruct translators on the OPTIMAL solution; actual translation work, however, is pragmatic; the translator resolves for that one of the possible solutions which promises a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort. That is to say, he intuitively resolves for the so-called MINIMAX STRATEGY” (“Translation as a Decision Process”, Venuti 156). Translation for him is at once an interpretation and creation.

The old debate whether translation is secondary and derivative does not seem very relevant today precisely because of these insights that we have into the process. Bassnett has identified a diagrammatic representation of the process of translation thus:

Author – Text – Receiver = Translator – Text – Receiver (Bassnett 38).

This shows the translator as both receiver and sender of the message which would require her to be creative as well.

◀ Previous   Next ▶

## Cultural Turn in Translation

This is a relatively new term in translation studies marking the reciprocal relationship between translation and a given cultural milieu. This was propounded by Mary Snell-Hornby in her book *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (1988) and espoused by theorists like André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett. The underlying premise of this approach is that translation cannot be dissociated from its socio-cultural moorings and viewed as a purely linguistic activity. Mary Snell-Hornby went so far as to say that a good translator has to be not only bilingual but bi-cultural. Today the field is informed by this perspective, as is evident in the diverse ways in which cultural theories have seeped into the study of translation.

## Assignments

1. Which are the concepts that are basic to translation as a practical activity as well as an academic discipline?
2. Identify a few idioms or proverbs in your mother-tongue and try to translate them into another language. What are the difficulties you face? How would you surmount them?

## References

Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. 1980. Revised edition 1991. London: Routledge.

Venuti, Lawrence. Ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000.

 **Previous**   **Next** 