






Module 11: Future of translation

Lecture 40: The Role of Translation in the Contemporary World

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Introduction

In the last lecture we looked at the position of translation in the world today, and the role of the translator. Translation has gained in importance as it has become a necessary requisite for the smooth conduct of business and state affairs in a rapidly shrinking globalized world.

Organizations like the UN, European Union, World Bank and IMF that are not confined to national boundaries have what Andrew Jocelyne describes as ‘foundational multilinguality’, in that they have many official or working languages (qtd in *Translation and Globalization*, 111). It is a multilingual world that acknowledges the fact and tries to cope with it by communicating with each other through translators or interpreters. In a world that is

increasingly troubled by differences in the name of religion, culture and power this becomes a significant gesture of understanding another language or culture.



However, is translation really helping in building a multilingual world where there is mutual respect and understanding for each other's language? Or is it simply replicating the world of economic and political power where the powerful few dictate orders to the powerless many? What is the real picture behind the heartening increase in translation activity of the past few decades? Is the world coming closer to the Biblical Babel, a monoglossic world which understands only one language, namely English? There are no accurate answers to these questions, and we can only attempt to find answers. Asking the right questions would perhaps succeed in staving off the threat of extinction that many ‘powerless’ or minority languages in the world is facing today.

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Powerless languages

How do you judge if a language is a powerless, weak or minority language? Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory had to demarcate languages into weak and strong. According to him, a language / literature could be weak if it was in the process of being established or if its position within a larger literary /linguistic framework was not central. For instance, many Indian tribal languages which are yet to get a script or got one recently, can be considered to be in this position. They are yet to produce confident literature in the written script and are so peripheral to mainstream Indian literature that they are practically invisible. Languages like these can be thought of as minority languages which find it difficult to survive the onslaught of more powerful languages in the globalized world.

The status of a minority language changes with the equations of economic and political power.

However, as Cronin points out, the minority position is not permanent. "The concept of minority is the expression of a relation not of an essence. A language may be displaced from the public sphere and thus increasingly marginalized from use in various areas of life because of invasion, conquest or subjection by a more powerful group" ("Minority", 170). Changing equations of power and prestige affect the position of a language also. The position of French in the world is an example. Till very recently, French was considered to be the language of the educated and the aristocratic – Tolstoy's aristocrats in *War and Peace* speak French, not Russian. The growth and establishment of the British Empire ousted French, and English came to be the lingua franca of the commercial and political world. The position of English in the world today should not be attributed to the inherent superiority of the language, but to the power exercised by the Anglo-American world. If this equation changes, then English can be relegated to the status of a minority language, even without any change in the geographical territory where it is spoken as a first language.

Another feature of a minority language is that it is a language that is translated into, rather than translated from. Cronin quotes Albert Branchadell's definition of the term 'less translated-language': "all those languages that are less often the source of translation in the international exchange of linguistic goods, regardless of the number of people using these languages" ("Minority", 170). The problem with these languages is that they tend to translate more, which might eventually rid them of their individuality.

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English in India

However, this definition of less translated language as weak need not always hold true, as is evident from the position of English in India. We have already noted how most of the translations of Indian language literary works are into English in India (Lecture#28, Languages and the Politics of Translation in India). Paul St-Pierre, in his “Translation in an Era of Globalization” examines the nature of translations from Oriya into English and back. He shows that contrary to expectations, there has been a decline in translations from English to Oriya since 1970. The number of translations from English, among other languages, was also less. However, there was an increase in the number of translations from Oriya into English between 1942 and 2001. Obviously, the less translated-language status belongs to English in this scenario. Does this mean that English is in a less favoured position compared to Oriya?



Far from it. What it actually reflects is the importance accorded to English in the Indian situation, the prevalent feeling that a literary work becomes worthy of recognition once it gets translated into English. As St-Pierre puts it, this is the effect of globalization: “the value accorded English, the delinking with the local and regional language and culture and its subsequent marginalization” (170). English is so powerful that it threatens the existence of other languages in India. As St-Pierre observes, this is a double movement: “These translations are being produced for both national and regional, and occasionally international, readerships, at a moment when globalization is at one and the same time erasing, valorizing, the local and the regional ... it is the sign, rather, of a process in which local languages and cultures are being irremediably lost ...” (171).

The translators of Indian language works into English have a tendency to make the translations fluent to suit the target readership. In their zeal to appeal to the English-speaking reader in India and abroad, the translators have to resort to various domesticating strategies at the risk of sacrificing the cultural identity of their own language. Cronin points out: “Minority languages that are under pressure from powerful major languages can succumb at lexical and syntactic levels so that over time they become mirror images of the dominant language...As a result of continuous translation, they can no longer be translated. There is nothing left to translate” (*Translation and Globalization*, 141). The relationship between two languages cannot be on equal grounds if the source text is adjusted to suit the target readers, as is happening with the English translations of regional Indian texts. Most of the translations have extensive glosses to explain culture specific terms.

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Languages in Different Time-zones

Cronin argues that this unequal relationship between languages occurs when they belong to different time zones, a process he describes as the chronostratification of languages (refer lecture #22, “Translating in a Globalized World”). He explains that “certain languages are on the fast track of lexical creation and other languages are in different time-zones, with consequences for the development and representation of those languages” (122). Languages can thus be thought of as belonging to the past, present or future. According to this classification, English would belong to the optimal time-zone while a minority Celtic language would be in a more peripheral time-zone. In the Indian context, Hindi would be peripheral while tribal languages would be so removed from all this to be practically invisible.



Languages in the past are those like the tribal languages which are thought of as unequipped to handle various aspects of contemporary life. They would not have terms for modern gadgets or even states of mind that are seen as essential features of modern life. Languages in the present are those that are ill-equipped but try to compensate for these inadequacies by resorting to calques or literal translation of a foreign word or phrase. Sometimes they also use these words without any translation. How many Indian languages, for instance, use an indigenous term on a regular basis for objects like car, bus, train or computer? Calques are indicative of the laziness of language users to come up with a suitable equivalent in their own tongue. The result, as Cronin observes is this: “The calques end up discrediting the translation process and are regularly cited, for example, by the Anglophone press as pointing to the terminal hopelessness of attempts to control the nature of the assimilation of English into other languages” (*Translation and Globalization*, 122).

A language like English that is seen as able to represent the present world with all its technological sophistication and economic brilliance inspires confidence. It is felt that it can deal with the future too. It is a “strong language on the information super-highway”, in that this is the language spoken and written by science, technology and academic research in these areas (*Translation and Globalization*, 123). A language like this would not like to be in a situation where it has to be translated into other languages to be understood. The power dynamics is such that it should not be translated; rather, others have to translate themselves to understand English.

The Language of Academic Research

Besides the language of scientific and technical literature, the language of academic research world-wide also happens to be English. This has become all the more true with the advent of computers into academia. However, the English that is used in the cyber world is a deterritorialized language and it would be more correct to call it Microsoft English. This English is different from the British English that most Indians are used to. For instance, the computer will underline the British spellings like ‘sanitise’, ‘favour’, ‘traveller’ etc as wrong spellings and urge you to convert to American spellings. Cronin explains: “Users of British English are a minority on the new Anglophone electronic net and they constantly have to translate interlingually from American into British English and vice versa” (151). A hierarchy is clearly forming among speakers of the same language, with the speakers of cyber-English located at the top.

This knowledge of cyber language applies to academic research also, especially with the use of style sheets in the writing of research papers for publication in academic journals. Let us take the case of English literature. Most journals of repute in the field today are US-based and the style sheets usually followed are the MLA stylesheet or Chicago Manual of Style. They insist on standardized American spellings and syntax – in short, writers of research papers are strongly advised to internalize the stylistic and syntactic peculiarities of cyber English or Microsoft English. The papers are usually submitted electronically which means that they are forced through the rigours of word processing software to render it fit for foreign consumption. Ironically, even journals devoted to translation studies insist on this monochromatic language!

The language of academic research has created a new hierarchy of those who know cyber / Microsoft English, and those who do not.

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A Future Babel?

If English of the cyber or non-cyber variety is poised to take over the world, then are we facing the prospect of inhabiting a world where there is but one language? Does this reflect mankind's desire to communicate without the hindrance of mutually incomprehensible languages? Cronin terms this desire as "neo-Babelianism" which sees "linguistic diversity *per se* as an obstacle and argues for the speaking of one language, preferably English" (*Translation and Globalization*, 60). The danger with this is that it is smuggling in a cyber language which is US-oriented. Cronin quotes Timothy Brennan who sees his country's "unprincipled expansionism masquerading as cultural pluralism" in symbols that are highlighted as celebrating cultural hybridity like "Nike trainers to Simpsons T-shirts to McDonald's restaurants" (*Translation and Globalization*, 53).



This linguistic and by extension, cultural homogeneity spells disaster for linguistic plurality. If all tongues were to be chiseled down to the sameness of cyber English, then what is the future of our languages like Manipuri or Sindhi or Kannada? The minority languages or powerless languages can think of translation as a "guarantor of diversification", or a means to retain their identity through difference ("Minority", 171). But the tendency in translation studies was to consider these minority languages only in the context of literary translation, under the impression that they are not developed enough for scientific and technical translation. However, a growing awareness of the issue, thanks to the development of fields like postcolonial studies, has led to the recognition that minority languages also function in the fields of science and technology in their own ways.

Cronin points to an important aspect of translation with respect to minority languages, which is that of the symbolic function of language. Language is used as a marker of cultural identity and very often has a symbolic value which exceeds the communicative value. "That is to say, for political or other reasons speakers of minority languages may have a perfectly good knowledge of a dominant language (Catalans knowing Spanish) but still insist on translation from and into that language" ("Minority", 171). Translation in this context is not primarily about communication, but about asserting one's cultural and linguistic identity. In the Indian context, a comparable case would be that of Tamil with its aggressive refusal to assimilate the official language of Hindi. This also becomes an act of resistance to the linguistic hegemony of a powerful language.

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Translation Tomorrow

This form of resistance can be expressed strongly in the field of literary translation. Although translation of literature is but a minor part of translation activity as a whole, it has the potential to become an agent of subversion that can upset the plans for domination by any single language. Perhaps translation is the only means to maintain the precious diversity that can keep a monolingual world at bay. Cronin terms this as a translation that is based in cultural negentropy, which is “primarily concerned with the ‘emergence of new’ cultural forms through translation practice and the way in which translation contributes to and fosters the persistence and development of diversity” (*Translation and Identity*, 129).

Borrowing a term from John Urry, Cronin argues that translations should be modeled on the hologram, where the hologram becomes a metaphor for the modern age. “Information in a hologram is not located in any particular part or it. Rather any part contains, implies and resonates information of the whole” (qtd in *Translation and Identity*, 132). A translator while translating, has to not only love the text she is translating, but have a comprehensive view of the literature she is translating from and into – in short, she has to perceive the whole in the part; this strategy is what Maria Tymoczko describes as metonymic and is what is meant by the hologrammatic dimension to translation. “This is translation’s contribution to ‘diversality’, to the negentropic, as it shows how diversity persists in the elaborateness of the particular, how translation’s commitment to close reading and linguistic attentiveness shows that in the case of each text, the ‘monde, aussi petit soit-il, est vaste’ (world as small as it is wide)” (*Translation and Identity*, 133).



Translations, especially literary translations, might appear ridiculously flimsy attempts at resistance to the overwhelming flood of homogeneity that is a consequence of western-oriented globalization. However, when an English text is translated using the domesticating strategy into Kokborok to suit the reader or when a Tamil text is translated into English using the foreignizing strategy to be faithful to the source text, what is happening is a small but meaningful gesture of acknowledging and respecting difference. This is where translation gives us hope.

Assignments

1. What are the ways in which the diversity of the world is threatened by the powerful economic and political forces?
2. Attempt to locate and recognize the ways in which globalization has affected your culture and language.

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