

Module 6: Cultural turn in translation

Lecture 19: The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies

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Introduction

The term 'cultural turn' refers to a shift that occurred in the field of translation studies around the 1980. The shift occurred in the perspective towards translation and the theory that came up around the practice of translation. Translation was no longer thought of as a linguistic activity that was done in isolation, but as the product of a broader cultural context that encompassed plural belief systems. Andre Lefevere was one of the first theorists to adopt this stance.

According to him: "Translation needs to be studied in connection with power and patronage, ideology and poetics, with emphasis on the various attempts to shore up or undermine an existing ideology or an existing poetics" (10). He adds that it has to be studied in terms of the language and text that are being translated, besides the questions of why, how and who translates. He goes on: "Seen in this way translation can be studied as one of the strategies cultures develop to deal with what lies outside their boundaries and to maintain their own character while doing so – the kind of strategy that ultimately belongs to the realm of change and survival, not in dictionaries and grammars" (10). Translation was thus no longer seen as just a linguistic transference of texts, but as a strategy that links up two cultures that might have an unequal power relationship. It thus becomes a literary / cultural history of two nations or cultures, mirroring and sometimes subverting, the given perceptions. However, it should also be pointed out that Lefevere was not the first to view translation as part of a larger cultural context; Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory did something similar. But while Even-Zohar confined his theory to the literary realm, what Lefevere did was to take translation outside the realms of pure language. Translation was expanded to take in retellings and adaptations. The film adaptation of a literary text is construed as a translation, perhaps inter-semiotic. The various acts of conscious and unconscious translations that we do in our daily lives become part of the domain of translation studies. For example, the job of interpreting, machine translations, communication in a multilingual world etc are coming under closer scrutiny. Translation theorists like Maria Tymoczko are using translations to study the balance of power between cultures, as reflected in languages. Michael Cronin has written extensively on the impact of globalization on the activity of translation. Much of postcolonial translation, with its self-reflexive thoughts on the strategy and aim of translation, can be seen as part of the cultural turn. Thus the focus of translation studies seems to be shifting to the broader area that is encompassed by the rubric of cultural studies, and this cultural turn is paving the way for

The cultural turn has helped to focus attention on the extra-literary factors at play in the process of translation. Translation is seen as a cultural strategy that mirrors and sometimes subverts existing socio-cultural norms and practices.

meaningful studies of the socio-cultural aspects of translation.

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Andre Lefevere

The one name that is most associated with the cultural turn is Andre Lefevere's. His base was Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, but Lefevere moved away from it quite soon. Born in Belgium, educated in England and working in many languages, Lefevere was a polyglot interested in comparative literature. His theories on translation stemmed from his experience as translator; in fact, it was his firm conviction that theory should be rooted in practice, especially in the field of translation studies. His major contribution to the field of translation studies was the emphasis on the cultural component of translation activity. His most prominent works, besides numerous papers in journals, are *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, *Translation, History and Culture*, an anthology co-edited with Susan Bassnett, and an edited anthology of writings on translation, *Translation, History, Culture*.

Lefevere's work in translation began in the 1980s with essays that he wrote on the subject. In one of them he introduced the concept of refracted texts. What he meant by refraction was “the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work” (“Mother Courage's Cucumbers”: 235). The most obvious form of refraction, according to him, was translation. A writer's work is understood always by refractions, or through “misunderstandings and misconceptions”, according to Lefevere. He states: “Writers and their work are always understood and conceived against a certain background or, if you will, are refracted through a certain spectrum, just as their work itself can refract previous works through a certain spectrum” (234). A translation becomes a refraction because the source text is processed through the understanding of the translator, or in other words, the work is refracted through the prism of the translator. The way the text is refracted rests on extra-literary factors like the culture and society that the translator is part of. Lefevere's essay “Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature” is an analysis of the way Brecht was translated into English to suit the receptor culture and its ideology.

According to Lefevere, translation is refraction, or “the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work.”

Translation and Culture

With years, Lefevere became more interested in questions behind the act of translation, like Why translate? Does the act of translating a text into your language imply that you feel your language/culture to be inadequate? Who translates and why? How can the reader tell that the translation is an adequate representation of the original? These questions led him on to issues of authority and power in the intercultural activity called translation. He saw it as a “channel opened, often not without a certain reluctance, through which foreign influences can penetrate the native culture, challenge it, and even contribute to subverting it” (2). The perceived difference in status between two cultures can, and does, affect translation strategy. Translators in the West have given respect to the Greek and Latin authors when they translated them because they thought that Greece and Rome had a far superior culture. But there was a certain flippancy when it came to translation of works from the Orient, which indicated the condescension in the attitude to the East and the colonies. The only time the west allowed certain liberties with Greek and Latin texts was when translation was part of a language learning exercise. Very often, the unequal relationship between languages/cultures resulted in a translation which was biased in favour of the dominant culture. This can be seen in translations from an Indian language into English where the translator feels obliged to make the reading smooth for the receptor, either by avoiding awkward usages or providing glosses.

As Lefevere points out, the “poetics” of the receptor culture affects the translations, as the translator tries to modify her/his work according to it. But the reverse can also happen whereby translators try to influence the poetics of the receptor culture through their translations. The German dramatist Schlegel, for instance, felt that the inordinate influence of the French dramatists on German drama should be lessened to a certain degree. He therefore translated Shakespeare into German in the hope of providing a different role model and an alternative approach to dramatics.

The status of the TL with respect to the SL determines the translation strategy, and the nature of translation.

There are other ways in which translations affect the receptor culture. For one thing, translators can help enlarge the vocabulary of the receptor language. If the source text has a word that does not have an equivalent, s/he can “coin new expressions” as Cicero the famous Roman translator advised. Lefevere points out how countless translators have over the years enlarged their vocabulary as well as rhetorical devices. The activity of translating becomes a good ‘creative writing workshop’ of sorts, because, it allows them to “make up a hundred little rules for themselves” (Lefevere quoting Gottschied: 46). It is also a good pedagogical device for the teaching of language. Translating from one language to the other helps in

knowing and understanding a language better, or understanding another culture better. This had been an integral part of language teaching process even in schools, notes Lefevere.

The inequality between cultures tends to get emphasized in translations. If the source text is considered to be central to its culture, then its translations too will be scrutinised carefully. The Bible is a good example of this. Even a slight variation from the source text can be seen as an act of subversion against the culture it represents. Lefevere notes Sir Thomas More's allegation against Tyndale who translated the Bible into English, of having “changed in his translation the common known words to the intent to make a change in the faith” (70). Tyndale's crime was not just bad translation, but blasphemy. However, if the receptor culture perceives itself to be superior, then the attitude changes. The best example of this is Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat, where he took liberties with the original. Lefevere notes: “It is in the treatment of texts that play a central role within a culture and in the way a central culture translates texts produced by cultures it considers peripheral, that the importance of such factors as ideology, poetics, and the Universe of Discourse [words, fashions, objects or concepts peculiar to a culture] is most obviously revealed” (70).

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The reader

While emphasising the different cultures involved in translation, Lefevere does not forget the reader or the receptor of the translation. In this, he seems to agree with Gideon Toury's concept of target-oriented translation. Lefevere was of the view that translations vary according to the tastes of the readers. He quotes the famous German writer Goethe as saying: "if you want to influence the masses, a simple translation is always best. Critical translations vying with the original really are of use only for conversations the learned conduct among themselves" (6).

What is meant by 'simple' translation is one that does not disturb the aesthetic sensibility of the reader too much or one that, according to Lefevere, "wholeheartedly naturalizes the original" (6). The translator should use words and sentences that are natural to the common man.

It is not only language that s/he should translate, but the customs and habits of the source culture. Certain habits of the source culture might appear strange and offensive to

the receptor culture; then the translator should 'soften' these so that the reader might not be offended. In this context, it is worthwhile to notice how translations into English function. Indian works translated into English almost always have extensive glossaries to explain culture-specific terms. On the other hand, we do not see the same process in the translations of foreign language works into Indian languages. Think of the translations of classics like the Russian master Tolstoy's works. Even the name Anna Karenina is culture-specific. Anna takes on the surname 'Karenina' because she is the wife of Karenin. But translations do not usually clarify this detail, even when proper nouns threaten to become a hindrance to the smooth reading of Russian books.

The target reader's cultural preferences go a long way in deciding the nature of translation.

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Ideology

Since Lefevere was of the view that translation is very much part of the cultural context, it was but natural that it would be influenced by ideology. Lefevere goes back to Terry Eagleton's definition of ideology as “a set of discourses which wrestle over interests which are in some way relevant to the maintenance or interrogation of power structures central to a whole form of social and historical life” (qtd in Gentzler: 136). Ideology need not be interpreted solely in terms of political beliefs, but as the prevailing set of belief systems in a society at a given point of time. Ideology can be overt or covert, but its pressure is felt by writers and translators, irrespective of the society they belong to. We have already seen how translations can vary according to the translator's ideology, through the analysis of translations of *Anandamath* and *Abhinjanasakuntalam*. Translations can be viewed as a potential threat because they can introduce another perspective on life and society, which is different from that of the receptor culture. For instance, an Indian language translation of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* can be a problem. Lawrence wrote that novel to explode the sexual hypocrisy of British society, for which he used the theme of extramarital love and a candid language that contained many taboo words. Indian society with its conservative approach might not take kindly to a translation of this work. Lawrence was motivated by his personal ideology in the writing of the book; a translator who shares that ideology can be moved to translate it with the specific purpose of exposing sexual hypocrisy. This is why Victor Hugo opined: “When you offer a translation to a nation, that nation will almost always look on the translation as an act of violence against itself” (qtd in Lefevere: 14). It is the tendency of most societies to maintain status quo, and in doing so it will resist any attempt that might upset that. This is why the state always tries to restrain people who have alternative ideologies. According to Lefevere, patrons can also take the place of the state in imposing ideology on the individual translator in the case of translations.

Besides new genres and forms, translations can also import new ideological perspectives into the receptor culture, which may not be well - received.

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Patronage

Lefevere shows how translation in medieval Europe was almost always commissioned by either those in power or the aristocracy. In such cases, the translator had very limited freedom with respect to what and how s/he could translate. These patrons have taken on different faces today. They can be representatives of an elected government, government institutions that commission translations, publishers, and critics. As Lefevere puts it: “If translators do not stay within the perimeters of the acceptable as defined by the patron (an absolute monarch, for instance, but also a publisher's editor), the chances are that their translation will either not reach the audience they want it to reach or that it will, at best, reach that audience in a circuitous manner” (7). In almost all cases the patron will be the representative of the dominant ideology. Critics can also be seen as limiting the translator's freedom because they demand the translator's conformity to the dominant aesthetic discourse. Translations of works that radically depart from conventional forms of literature would find it difficult to find a foothold in the receptor culture, unless the author of the source text has a formidable reputation. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is a case in point. Apart from the practical difficulty in translating it, the translator will have to explain the poetics of this work to the receptor culture.

Publishing houses, media and academic criticism take the place of patrons in the contemporary literary world.

Just as patrons encourage the translations of certain works, there can be severe discouragement as well of the translation of some other works. Philemon Holland has commented about this in his preface to the translation of Pliny; he mentions the objections raised by some people to the translation of Pliny, and sets about to answer those criticisms. So has Jean de Breche de Tours who translated Hippocrates. He mentioned the opposition of people with vested interests who did not want these medical texts to be out in the public domain. Similarly, the scriptures are sensitive texts. The authorities of institutionalised religion generally frown on translations of scriptural texts into the language of the common man. The opposition to the vernacular translation of the Bible is well documented. The Quran also is encouraged to be read in its original language version of Arabic. In these cases, translations are perceived to have the potential to become blasphemy by subverting the word of God.

Conclusion

Thus Lefevere and others like him placed translation in the larger cultural context, and enlarged its scope by raising many related issues. It is not as if translation theories in the past had not considered these, but it was the first time that extra-literary factors were seriously looked at. The focus on culture and ideology also helped to pinpoint the socio-political underpinnings of translation which appears to be a simple, scholarly linguistic exercise that is largely confined to the academies. One drawback of the cultural turn, however, is that it tends to wander away from the empirical field of translation, on to regions of abstract theorizing. This results in a shift of focus from the actual practice of translation, which had never been the case so far in the field of translation studies. But this cultural turn seems to be in keeping with the globalized world of today and equips translation studies to meet the challenges and goals of a rapidly changing world.

Assignments

1. Do you think the cultural turn in translation studies is a welcome trend? Why?
2. Who are the patrons of translations in today's world? How would you evaluate their role in the production and consumption of translations?

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