Module 2: Introduction to Translation Studies as a discipline

Lecture 5: Evolution of Translation Studies as a Discipline

The Lecture Contains:

- **Introduction**

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Introduction

Now that we have got an overview of translation and its various strategies, let us look at the field that is today termed Translation Studies. When and how did it become a separate discipline or field of study? What have been the points of focus of this field down the years? Who were the key figures in this area?

The name 'Translation Studies' was proposed by André Lefevere who was himself a prominent theoretician. In an Appendix written in 1978 to a collection of papers on translation he suggested that this name be given to the field that deals with "the problems raised by the production and description of translations" (qtd by Bassnett xiii). So, although translation has been around for centuries, the field of Translation Studies was given a local habitation and a name only relatively recently.

André Lefevere

Lawrence Venuti, another prominent name in the field, also points out that this is a relatively young discipline that is barely into its early thirties. In his "Introduction" to the Translation Studies Reader that he edited, he points out how the discipline has expanded much beyond its traditional realm of language, literature and philosophy and is subsumed under the broader field of cultural theory that would even include anthropology. He quotes Louis Kelly who argues that a complete theory of translation would have three components: "specification of function and goal; description and analysis of operations; and critical comment on relationships between goal and operations" (Venuti 4). Very often, a particular theory would emphasize one component over the others. However, Venuti points out how translation theories remain language-based and quoting Kelly again, how they can be broadly classified into instrumental and hermeneutic. Language is seen as a means of communication and is expected to convey information or some message of a reality that can be represented. A theory that falls into the instrumental category would be based on this assumption. On the other hand a theory that views language as interpretation would be hermeneutic. An instrumental theory of translation would be concerned about the accurate rendering of the SL text where as a hermeneutic theory would look at the cultural aspects that go into the making of a text.

In fact, the hermeneutic approach will provide us with an insight into the changes in perspective that have developed towards translation in the west from the 19th century onwards. The translator was seen as a menial in deference to the master writer, as opposed to the 'translator as writer's equal' view of the

previous centuries. Susan Bassnett sees this as an offshoot of "changing concepts of nationalism and national languages [that] marked out intercultural barriers with increasing sharpness". In the attempt to carry over a text that was culturally different, the translator had to curb his creativity. On the other hand, the expansion of colonies led to the overconfidence that Edward Fitzgerald exhibits in his translation of Omar Khayyam. Both are relationships that involve power—in the first one, the SL writer is a king who demands loyalty from his subordinate the translator and in the second, the translator is merely a facilitator who makes the SL text known to the reader and is not responsible for any inferiority that may be detected in the text.

The 19th century ambivalence towards translation resulted in confusion about the nature of the work. The problem was how to describe the work of translation – Is it an art or craft? If it is an art, the implication is that it involves creativity; if it is craft, it is merely a mechanical putting together of various spare parts. Terming it a 'science' would also appear to make it a more mechanical than it actually is. These debates are still going on even today and are largely unresolved.

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Major Issues

What are the major issues that mark the field in the 20th century? If we look at the early decades of the 20th century we find the domination of German philosophical precepts. According to this viewpoint, language is not merely a means of communication, but it is the shaping force of external reality. In other words, language is the way in which we interpret the reality around us. Naturally translation becomes another way of interpretation of a reality that might be foreign to the reader. Here translation can have other functions than merely linguistic. It assumes the cultural function of becoming a pathway to other realities. Friedrich Schleiermacher, one of the influential figures of this period, believed that translation was another cognitive process and can help build language and literature.

This period also marks the beginning of modernism as a literary movement in the west. This age was characterized by experimentation in the form and content of literature; translation too became the subject of experimentation. Translation was seen as a work in its own right with a life that was independent of the original. Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923) concedes that "a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (qtd in Venuti 16). But he states that the function of the original and the translation are different, and so are the tasks of the poet and the translator: "As translation is a mode of its own, the task of the translator, too, may be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet" (qtd in Venuti 19). Ultimately

> *"Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense..."*
> Benjamin

translation becomes an expression of what Benjamin terms the "central reciprocal relationship between languages" (17).But no literary work can be equated with information it can convey; according to Benjamin, "there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated, depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized" (Venuti, 22). This is what he terms the "nucleus of pure language" where the language "no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages" (Venuti, 22). The task of the translator is to "release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of the work" (Venuti, 22).

Translation was also seen as a way to bring in innovations of style and form, as Ezra Pound did with his

Cathay that was inspired by Chinese poetry. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges viewed a translation as a variant interpretation of the same text; hence a translation became a different text altogether. The theoretical debates which were to inform the field of translation studies in the century were beginning to emerge in these decades.

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Translatability

The question of translatability of a text became much discussed in the period before 1950s. The realization that texts are separated not just by languages, but also cultures that are unbridgeable and occasionally mutually incomprehensible, gave rise to the debate whether literary texts are actually translatable. As Edward Sapir puts it: "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality" (qtd in Bassnett 13). So the debate centred on whether a translation from one language into another was really feasible. Perhaps this can be seen as natural in the west that was waking up to a different world after the World War II. The seemingly homogeneous

Edward Sapir

colonial empires had fragmented into nationalities of varying languages and cultures; They felt inadequate to cope with this baffling variety of languages. May be this prompted them to wonder if total comprehensibility of other languages is ever a possibility.

Strategies of translation, however, were not radically different. Vladimir Nabokov, the émigré Russian writer in the U.S, did a translation of Alexander Pushkin's Russian classic *Eugene Onegin* which was more 'Russianized' than Americanized. His argument was that Pushkin's subtle textual and other cultural allusions would otherwise be lost. Roman Jakobson's "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959) conceived of language as essentially a semiotic system where meaning is not a referent of reality. If this is accepted, then the question of conveying a text in one language into another language does not involve the carrying over of a message or information.Translation, according to him, is a process of recoding which "involves two equivalent messages in two different codes".

Equivalence

From here, Translation Studies moves on to the other fundamental concept of equivalence. Equivalence or similarity with the SL text in meaning and structure is what most translations aim to do. The notion of untranslatability would negate the concept of equivalence, but in the period starting with the 1960s we find theorists who believe in the ability of translations to convey a message that is more or less accurate. If we believe in equivalence, naturally we have to accept certain universal standards in literature and culture that can be understood irrespective of differences. There were two forms of equivalence: formal and pragmatic. Formal equivalence meant that the translation would retain its cultural specialities or in other words its 'foreignness'; pragmatic equivalence is more conscious of the reader in the TL and appears almost like a text in that language. If formal equivalence advertised the fact that the work was a translation, pragmatic equivalence tried to hide this. In a way, as Venuti points out, this is but another way of debating the 'word for word' or 'sense for sense' debate of the ancients (122).

> The equivalence debate was reminiscent of the old 'word-for-word' or 'sense-for-sense' debate in translation.

Basically the focus was on the functional aspect of translation or whether the translation conveys the SL text to the reader. There was a growing need for translations that were functional in nature like that of official documents, news reports and operation manuals, where equivalence was important. Literary translations were a different matter altogether. Theorists like Itamar Evan-Zohar argued that literature is a 'polysystem' of interrelated forms where equivalence is a relative term. A translation was a system in its own right and had a unique relationship with the original. The concept of polysystem was a significant departure in the history of translation theory. This group led by Evan-Zohar and Gideon Toury, is known as the Tel Aviv group in Translation Studies, and has been influential in evaluating translations against their cultural contexts.

It is in this period that Translation Studies emerges as a discipline in its own right, as distinct from linguistics and literature. J. C. Catford and George Steiner are other major names in this field. Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) was a prominent work. Steiner was opposed to the linguistics-oriented translation theories and went back to the hermeneutic concept of language. He believed that translation was interpretation and need not always communicate meaning. In fact he felt that "great translation must carry with it the most precise sense possible of the resistant, of the barriers intact at the heart of understanding" (qtd in Venuti 124). Catford, however, believed in certain universal elements that could

surmount the cultural differences between languages.

Susan Bassnett's *Translation Studies* published in 1980 marks a defining moment in the area of translation. This small book delimited the area marked out for translation studies and was a comprehensive account of the theories and theorists in the field. More importantly, it proved the right of translation studies to exist as a discipline in its own capacity. Like Itamar Even-Zohar, theorists believed that translated literature had an independent existence apart from the SL text and also from the TL literature. Functionalism is at the heart of many of the theories of this period and this could be attributed to the large number of translations that had to be undertaken regularly in the case of 'informative literature' like news reports or operation manuals that were fundamentally informative in nature.

André Lefevere is the prominent figure of this period. His principles were similar to Evan-Zohar, but different in that he views translation as a form of rewriting or what he terms 'refraction'. He pointed out that translations are shaped by the cultural milieu of the TL and create a new tradition in that language. He urged the necessity to view translations as independent works in their cultural contexts; translation was gaining a status that was previously denied to it as a secondary and derivative activity.

Post structuralist and Postcolonial Influences

One significant impact of poststructuralist theories was that translation was no longer viewed as an innocent re-rendering of one text into another language. The influence of poststructuralist theories of language and the Derridean concepts of shifting meaning complicated the activity of translation. Derrida did not believe in a stable text or meaning; if this is true, then what does a translation convey? In the Derridean sense, a translation is an original text; rather, both the translation and original texts are derivative and hence 'unoriginal'. A translation, because it uses the treacherous medium of language, rather than 'carrying over' the text successfully, might deconstruct it. Understandably, equivalence becomes a highly debatable concept according to this view. The poststructuralist concept of the indeterminacy of language undermined the concept of translatability and equivalence.

Postcolonial theory also influences the perspective on much of translation theory. The western attitude to translation was interrogated by the multi-lingual cultures of the former colonies, especially countries like India and Nigeria. The inherently unequal power dynamics behind the translation process in a country like India was highlighted by a postcolonial consciousness. The tendency even today to translate from an Indian language into English rather than another Indian language has been examined in this light. It is pointed out that this is dictated by the economy of the marketplace where translations in English sell better, indicative of a mindset that prefers the colonizer's language. Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context (1992)* was an important work that discussed the politics of translation that was undertaken in colonial India.

> Postcolonial theory interrogated the basic concepts of western-oriented translation theories and came up with radically different ideas of equivalence and fidelity.

Michael Cronin's works like Translation *and Identity (2006)*, and *Translation and Globalization* (2003) focus our attention on the process of translation in a world that is facing the challenges of globalization. He examines the position of translation in a world that is brought closer by economic and commercial compulsions; where globalization becomes a euphemism for '*americanization*' and much of translation activity is to the advantage of the English-speaking world. Translation is seen as a politically loaded activity which reflects the power hierarchy in an increasingly unequal world.

The technologically sophisticated contemporary world has also seen advances in machine translation. Although the basic premise for this goes back to Descartes's concept of a universal language, the idea of using computers to facilitate the translation process gained currency since the 1950s. It is said to be based

on Descartes' concept because this also works on the premise that there are certain universal structures that underlie most languages. Based on these broad frameworks computers translate texts from one natural language into another. The drawback is that this can be done only with formulaic rather than literary texts; the language has to be standardized to facilitate machine translation. However this area is of great interest to computer scientists who are investigating human cognitive processes and language recognition.

Contemporary Situation

So, Translation Studies has definitely come of age today. What is significant is its expansion of borders to encompass other discourses and disciplines that are strictly outside its realm. It is entering the broader area marked out by cultural studies, as it borrows from areas that are not directly connected to it. Feminism, anthropology, film and media studies, and aesthetics are some of the fields that are brought together by translation studies.

This results in a complexity that was hitherto not discernible in the field. The increased interest in translation studies is reflected in the number of university departments devoted exclusively to this. There are numerous scholarly works on various aspects of the discipline. The main trends in contemporary theory inform the field. However, there are translation theorists who fear that the 'cultural turn' (as it has been termed) in translation studies will result in the devaluation of its practical uses. Andre Lefevere had stated that the purpose of translation studies was to "produce a comprehensive theory which can also be used as a guideline for the production of translations" (qtd in Bassnett 7). This very clearly states the connection that exists between theory and practice in the field. So even as translation theories expands its boundaries beyond languages there are theorists who insist on not losing sight of its immediate purpose.

Assignments

1. What are the various strands that go into the making of Translation Studies as a discipline?
2. In your opinion, which is the most important theoretical stand in the field of Translation Studies? Justify your position.

References

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