

Module 6: Cultural turn in translation

Lecture 23: Migration, Language and Identity

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Introduction

We have been looking at the impact of globalization on languages and translation. We have seen how the world has shrunk and more people tend to travel to other countries. One of the foremost features of life in the 20th century and the present one is the migration of people from their homelands to other countries in search of livelihoods. This of course is not a modern phenomenon, but we cannot think of a period in which this was so well documented. Migration results in cultural hybridity or mingling, as people from one language and culture are forced to adapt to an alien language and culture. This results in mixing of languages and cultures, and also leads to problems in defining oneself in terms of mother-tongue or country. For example, consider the case of the child of Indian parents who have migrated to the USA. The child, born in the USA, is technically an American citizen. She will also be American in her taste and lifestyle, as she will imbibe the culture around her. But she will not be able to escape the Indian influence either, as her home and upbringing will bring that influence to bear on her. As far as language goes, she is sure to be fluent in English and might have a smattering of an Indian language. If she is asked to define herself in terms of language and country, she would find it difficult to answer easily. She would have to say that she is American but also Indian and that she cannot be defined by simplistic categories of language and nationality. Her identity is fluid and difficult to categorize. This member of the Indian diaspora is very much a citizen of today's globalized world. This fluidity in identity also means that she calls no language her own because there is no territory that she can really call her own. She is, as Salman Rushdie so poetically described himself, a "translated being", comfortable in multiple languages and at home in the world. Translation in this increasingly cosmopolitan or globalized world ceases to be an academic activity and becomes a daily necessity.



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Transnational Institutions

The phenomenon that we today call globalization has roots in financial as well as socio-political factors. Globalization forces multiple cultures and languages to find a common language to speak and communicate with each other – in short, the tower of Babel is searching for a common language. This has also become a political necessity in a world that has international organizations like the United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund on the one hand, and non-governmental organizations like Amnesty International, Greenpeace and World Social Forum, to name a few. Organizations of these sorts have to ensure communication between languages and cultures for their effective functioning. Translation plays a crucial role in these global systems.

The world today needs to speak a mutually comprehensible language because of economic and political reasons.

Translation is the vital link in the world of commerce and enterprise also. The information technology industry boom means that you can run a business anywhere in the world from your home, which also means that you are in constant touch with people who might not know your language. Call centres and transcription centres in India are examples of this outsourced business. Call centre employees in India give road directions or handle customer complaints for people in the U.S. These disembodied voices speak in the same language and accent of an alien culture, becoming representatives of a translated existence.

Bilingualism or multilingualism becomes an advantage in the field of defence and security. In a world that is facing security risks from all parts of the globe, knowing the language of your adversary is important to pre-empt his moves and avert a possible disaster. The U.S after 9/11 is a case in point where the intelligence authorities needed people who knew languages of the Middle East. Similarly, the American invasion of Iraq got complicated also by the language factor because communication with the locals often broke down as they did not know each other's languages.

Cosmopolitanism



The world today seems to have got closer or more cosmopolitan, with many people speaking to each other in different languages in different fora. Michael Cronin defines this cosmopolitanism as a “socio-cultural condition” (*Translation and Identity* 9). He says that “in an era of mass transportation, global tourism, significant migration and the relentless time-space compression of economies driven by information technology, cosmopolitanism is the body of thought most apt to describe our essential connectedness as global producers and consumers” (9). He also points out how it constructs “multiple subjects” or human subjects with “a plurality of different loyalties, a multiplicity of different ways in which they can be described or defined” (9). This cosmopolitanism also becomes a way of negotiation for the local with the global, and can provide frameworks of reference for translation practice in a world marked by inequalities between local languages and global languages that are stronger.

The translator is a cultural cosmopolitan because she moves away from her language /culture to reach out to another, through the process of translation.

Cronin borrows the term ‘cultural cosmopolitanism’ from David Held who defines it as “the ability to stand outside a singular location (the location of one’s birth, land, upbringing, conversion) and to mediate traditions” (11). Cronin argues that all translators are cultural cosmopolitans in this sense because translations means a moving away from one’s language and culture to another, even when the translation is into a foreign language. Thus translation becomes a process of mediation, one which takes place on a daily basis in the world. Translation also demands that even as you move away from your language, you remain rooted in it; otherwise, translation becomes an impossibility. In the present world, ‘your’ language means the language you are most proficient in, which need not be your mother-tongue – this is one of the advantages of cosmopolitanism.

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Cosmopolitanism and Translation

The commingling of cultures that is part of cosmopolitanism paves the way for a transnational translation or a translation process that is not confined to particular national boundaries. As Cronin explains:

“Contrary to earlier practice in the field of translation studies, it is no longer possible to limit histories of translation to literary phenomena within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state; account must be taken of the multiple translation activities of a country’s diaspora” (23). Cronin draws from Irish history where he locates three moments in the transnational translation history

Translation is also transnational, as the process links two languages and cultures.

of Ireland. The first moment is in the medieval period, when the Irish were involved in the revival of Latin as the medium of instruction. Irish monks who were also scholars in Latin, produced translations that connected monasteries in Ireland to other institutions in England and other European countries. The second moment is in the 17th century when the persecution of Irish Catholics led to the founding of Irish colleges in Europe. These places became centres of translation into Irish, and they were influential enough to mould the development of the modern Irish language. The third moment is located in the 20th century and can be perceived in the works of Irish writers like James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Denis Devlin. Joyce’s idiosyncratic style that used different languages without translation and Beckett who wrote in both French and English, were proving that translation is an integral part of their creative process. The country also had links with far-flung regions in Africa and United States, in the form of missionaries who went on evangelization missions in those places. Cronin underlines the essential mingling of cultures that would have occurred at these historical junctures. He also points out that this transnationalism is not the exclusive privilege of a small country like Ireland. He uses the example of China to illustrate this point.

Instead of going over to a foreign culture like China, it would be better if we tried to look at our own culture to understand the process of cultural mixing that is part of cosmopolitanism. Indian history shows that it is a mistake to link cosmopolitanism with the modern age. Our culture has always been syncretic or a mix of multiple cultures. The encounter of the Indus valley with the invading Aryans must have been the first of our intercultural experiences. We have had waves of invasions after that, with each succeeding invader settling down in this geographical territory to carve out a unique civilization. Sanskrit which was the major language in the ancient period had various regional dialects that in turn generated the growth of full-fledged languages. The other major language was Persian which was brought by the Mughal rulers. Urdu developed as a language out of the encounter of Hindi with Persian. We had, and still have, writers who are equally proficient in two languages. Mirza Ghalib wrote in Persian and Urdu, Premchand in Urdu and Hindi, O. V. Vijayan translated his Malayalam works into English, and Girish Karnad writes both in Kannada and English.

Cosmopolitanism is the essential feature of cultures like these. The translation history of India will straddle many cultures ranging from ancient Greek (think of Alexander's general Megasthenes who wrote *Indica*) to contemporary American (writers like Jhumpa Lahiri). This is why we would have to agree with Cronin when he says that a translation history of any country today is bound to be transnational.

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A Differing Perspective on Translations

Translations are generally thought of as enriching the literature of a language because it widens the horizons by opening up another literature. They have been traditionally thought of as introducing the target language readers to the source culture; in fact, translation theorists believed that a good translation should aim at reproducing the same effect that the text had on the source language readership. Michael Cronin, however, argues that with the blurring of boundaries between cultures and languages in the contemporary world, it is high time that we rethought this idea of translation. He urges us to think of translation not as *outside* our language, but from *inside* our language (31). This would mean that translated texts are considered to be part of the national literature. Cronin has a sound reasoning for this – he says that target language readers place translations in their own contexts and not in the source language context. So the translation effectively becomes a part of the literature they consider their own. For example, when Tolstoy or Marquez is read in English, we do not think of them as Russian or Spanish, but as English or at best without a particular cultural context. It is difficult to find an exact Indian analogy for this as Indian literature does not have one common language. But we can think of works translated from one Indian language to another. For instance, *Pavangal* (Nalappat Narayana Menon's Malayalam translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*), was received and appreciated by Malayalam readers as a literary work in Malayalam.

If this is the case, then translated works should find a place in the national literary canon alongside other works in the target language. English literature syllabi should have translations of works from other languages. This means that Premchand would be taught along with Dickens in India. Taking the example of English literature, Cronin argues that the best way is “not to use translated literature in English as a way into other cultures but to see translated literature as a way into English language and culture itself” (32). Translations that are seen as part of national canon also would help to dispel the myth of homogeneity in any culture.

Acknowledging translated literature as part of the literary canon of the receptor language would help to dispel the myth of homogeneity, and emphasize the fact that any national literature is a composite of plural elements.

They will clearly show that what we tend to see today as a single stream of cultural heritage is actually a sea fed by numerous indistinguishable streams. This will help in instilling a healthy respect for plurality which is essential in the world today. For one of the major problems that the world is facing today is that of distrust among communities that cling to the belief in the superiority of their cultures and have no tolerance for differences in beliefs and practices.

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Translational assimilation

Migration involves adjustment of one culture with another, perhaps totally alien culture. Generally the immigrant community tries to blend in with the native culture. This could be for a variety of reasons, the foremost being economic. Immigrants have to know the local language if they have to get reasonably good jobs that will ensure a decent income. For instance, Indians emigrating to English speaking countries like UK and USA need to be good at spoken and written English if they are interested in getting opportunities in what are called ‘white collar’ areas. Unskilled jobs with less or no job security are reserved for non-English speakers. So, it is in the best interests of the immigrants to learn the local language. Moreover, knowledge of the language makes it easier for the immigrant to understand and assimilate the local culture. This strategy is what Cronin terms ‘translation assimilation’, by which the immigrants “seek to translate themselves into the dominant language of the community” (52). As he puts it: “Translating oneself into the language of the host community is not only a way of understanding how that community thinks and functions but also a way of allowing oneself to become a fuller and more active member of it” (53). So the basic function of translation assimilation here is better employment opportunities and consequently a better way of life.

Through translational assimilation, immigrants manage to understand and assimilate themselves better to the host language and culture.

However, it is wrong to assume that it is only the immigrant language that gets influenced by the native language. It is a two-way process which often results in the ‘host’ language acquiring shades of the ‘guest’ language. The most common way in which this influence is manifested is in the appearance of foreign words. For example, the number of Indian words that have found their way into the English language and also into the dictionaries as respectable English words is large. This is due to the influence of Indians in Anglophone countries. In this context Cronin points out how English has a ‘migrant status’ by itself. Globalization has ensured that it is largely a ‘deterritorialized’ language, as it has also become the language of popular television and cyber worlds (56). It has thus effectively become the language of the modern world that transcends national boundaries. Mastery of this language means that translation is no longer necessary, for you are a citizen of the globalized world or are a ‘translated being’ yourself.

Translation accommodation

The other strategy that is used by immigrants to cope with the alien culture they find themselves in, and which can be thought of as the opposite of assimilation, is translation accommodation. Immigrants hold on to their mother-tongues in a bid to resist being absorbed or assimilated by the culture they find themselves in. Cronin defines this as a situation “where translation is used as a means of maintaining their languages of origin though this does not rule out limited or indeed extensive acquisition of the host-country language” (52). This can be a defiant act of protest against the insensitivity that is often displayed by the host country when it comes to recognition of ‘minority’ languages or cultures like Arabic or Bosnian. The current situation, especially in Anglophone countries, is to expect the immigrants to master the dominant language while their linguistic and cultural differences are not even acknowledged minimally. This breeds a feeling of being marginalized and out of this comes the defensive attitude of having to retain one’s identity in terms of language and culture.

Countries have to be sensitive to communities that are not fluent in the dominant language. Translation accommodation is one form of resistance through which immigrants fight back against the imposition of the dominant language.

Immigrant communities within a country pose problems of other sorts too. Visiting a doctor and explaining illness or vindicating yourself before a court of law requires a level of proficiency in the language. The host country has to be sensitive enough to supply interpreters or translators for these communities. Cronin cites the example of the Racial and Intercultural Office of the Irish police which produces booklets in English, French, Romanian, Serbo-Croat and Russian (58). He points out how “translation scholars will have to look at complex, internal translation relationships metonymically linked to global flows rather than focusing exclusively on what happens to languages and cultures beyond the borders of the nation-state” (58). So translation is more of an attempt to understand and communicate with the native society than a concern with foreign languages.

Thus we see that migration and cosmopolitanism are not phenomena that are confined to the socio-political realm alone, but are factors capable of altering our languages and cultures, perhaps even forcing us to perpetually occupy an in-between ‘translated’ space between two languages.

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Assignments

1. How does migration affect languages and translation? Think of how your own language has evolved/influenced by other languages you have come in contact with.
2. Can you think of examples from your linguistic community for the strategies of translation assimilation and translation accommodation?

Reference

Cronin, Michael. *Translation and Identity*. London: Routledge, 2006.

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