

Module 7: Role of the Translator

Lecture 25: The Invisible Translator

The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  What is a good translation?
-  Concept of authorship
-  Legal Position
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Introduction

We have so far been looking at the process of translation. Now let us look at the person behind a translation – the figure of the translator. It is an interesting paradox that the translator is largely ignored or is invisible in the debates that centre on translation. Where do we start our discussions about her?

The concept of the ‘invisible’ translator was first propounded by a prominent translation studies scholar Lawrence Venuti. He was drawing attention to a translation process that did not pay much attention to the translator who facilitates translation. All of us are familiar with the name of Tolstoy, but not the translator who made it possible for us to read that work in a language we know and understand. Venuti is of the view that this is because the prime quality that is valued in a translation is fluency, so that target language readers never feel that they are reading a foreign text. The translator sees to it that the text is ‘transparent’, or scrubbed clean of all the linguistic peculiarities that characterize a particular language or author and reads well and idiomatically.



This creates an illusion of the translation being an original text. As Venuti puts it: “The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (*The Invisibility of the Translator* 2). Venuti is of course considering the Anglo-American culture, but this is true of the Indian context as well. The layman’s perception of a good translation is that it reads easily and fluently, making you forget that you are reading a translation. This is perhaps the reason why you would think of Saratchandra Chatterjee as a Hindi writer or Sundara Ramaswamy who writes in Tamil as a Malayalam writer. Venuti is attempting to bring the hidden translator to light, by analyzing the workings of the process called translation.

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What is a good translation?

Venuti undertakes an interesting exercise to illustrate how the similarity to the original is the most valued attribute of a translation. He examines book reviews of translations that were published by leading newspapers and magazines, and points out how all of them invariably comment on the quality of the translation, as “pleasantly fluent”, “not quite idiomatic”, or “translation which flows crisply despite its occasionally disconcerting British accent” (3). None of them interestingly mentions the name of the translator. What constitutes a ‘good’ translation is the work rendered into language that is modern with vocabulary that is commonly used by the people. It will generally follow the syntactic pattern of the target language, make accessible the thoughts of the foreign text in language that is familiarized or to use Venuti’s term, “domesticated” (5). He is of the view that plain language, especially in the translation of non-literary works, is the end-product of market forces at work. With advancements in scientific research, clear and accurate translations from other languages became very important. The commercial interests of advertising also require clear communication with a motive to sell, of products across the world. ‘Transparent’ translations are crucial in this field. Venuti says that the trend in translation in the Anglo-American world, has been towards fluency and ease since the 18th century. This has made its impact on the literary as well as technical field.

Domestication is the process of changing the source language to suit the receptor language. This not only makes the translation read smoothly and well, but also renders the translator invisible.

What is the politics behind this sort of translation? The translations, in their attempt to be fluent in the target language (which is English in the Anglo-American world), tend to downplay the distinctive qualities that might mark a work in the source language. For example, we know the distinguishing features of Tolstoy’s themes, but never the distinguishing features of his language or style. This is because the translator cannot afford to be true to the idiosyncrasies of an individual author as it would appear too foreign and become a stumbling block for the target language reader. Venuti quotes a British translator J. M. Cohen who points to another problem with this obsession about fluency. He says that translators “have generally concentrated on prose-meaning and interpretation, and neglected the imitation of form and manner”, which leads to “the risk of reducing individual authors’ styles and national tricks of speech to a plain prose uniformity” (6). This is the result of far too much domestication on the part of the translator. The domestication is sometimes so effective that the work done by the translator to domesticate it, is rendered invisible.

Concept of authorship

Venuti is of the view that this concept of fluency can be linked to the notion of authorship that is prevalent in Anglo-American culture. According to this view, the author's writing expresses his/her thoughts and is original. Implicit in this concept is that a text is the author's transparent communication of her ideas and is unmediated by other socio-cultural factors. If writing is primary, then all translations would be secondary and derivative. It follows from this that translations have to be 'true' to the original, and maintain the illusion of being the 'original'. This is why most of the translators and translation theorists in the Anglo-American world have been concerned about fidelity in translation. So, one of the most important qualities that a translator should have is the capability to identify herself with the author. Again, there is the persistent feeling that the translator is subservient to the author, and needs to play second fiddle to her. Willard Trask who was an author and translator, illustrates the difference between 'original writing' and translation. He says that while writing a novel, what you are doing is "expressing yourself" (qtd in Venuti 7). But translation is different, it is like "performing a technical stunt". The translator is somewhat like an actor on stage, and "takes something of somebody else's and puts it over as if it were their own" (7). Venuti describes this tendency of the translator as "weird self-annihilation" (8). Even as this reduces the translator to the status of a menial, it successfully relegates translation to the periphery.

The concept of the author as the sole owner of the text leads to the concept of the translator as the menial who is doing a derivative work in deference to the author. However, traditional Indian concepts of authorship are not similar.

The Indian tradition did not share this rigid concept of authorship. Our early literary texts starting from the Vedas, do not have any individual author's name attached to them. Literature was primarily oral, and each retelling was consequently embellished with the reteller's contribution. It has to be remembered that the debates surrounding the identity of Vyasa who composed Mahabharata are yet to be settled. It is still open to speculation if Vyasa is the collective name given to a team of people who finally committed the verses to writing, or the name of an individual. Hence translations or retellings of these works were considered original works. For instance, the various Ramayanas in Indian languages are known after their respective translators—*Kambaramayana*, Tulsi's *Ramcharitmanas*, Ezhuthachchan's *Adhyatmaramayanam* etc. There was obviously no notion of original authorship or other copyright issues.

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Legal Position

The secondary status of the translator in the Anglo-American world is reflected in her legal status too. Venuti points out that British and American law defines translation as adaptation or derivative work based on “an original work of authorship” and the copyright for adaptations is vested with the author (8). According to this, the author can control the publication of translations during the term of the copyright, which is the author’s lifetime plus fifty years. But authorship is “defined as the creation of a form or medium of expression, not an idea, as originality of language, not thought” (9). So British and American law allows the copyright of a translation to the translator, “recognizing that the translator uses another language for the foreign text and therefore can be understood as creating an original work. In copyright law, the translator is and is not an author” (9).

The translator has the copyright over the translation, but the author’s copyright privileges override that of the translator’s.

British and American law give the translation copyright to the translator, but the control over the translation rests with the author. According to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, authors are given the control over translations in Britain and America. This holds good even if the authors are foreign nationals and the translators are not. This also means that the authors are entitled to legal protection in these countries while translators are not. The ‘is and is not an author’ status of the translator is emphasized by the Berne convention clause: “Translations, adaptations, arrangements of music and other alterations of a literary or artistic work shall be protected as original works without prejudice to the copyright in the original work” of the author (qtd in Venuti 9). It goes on to specify that the author “shall enjoy the exclusive right of making and of authorizing the translation”(9). This is the law in India also. The translator is seen as somewhat less than the author, despite the awards given to the best translator by the Sahitya Akademi and other institutions in India.

Publishing Contracts

The natural consequence of this perception of the translator is reflected in the contract that the translator is made to sign by the publisher. Most of the contracts do not see the translation as an original work and require the translator to obtain permission from the authorities for translation rights.

Venuti says that British and American publishing firms demand the copyright for the translation. The terms of the contract are also legally 'safe' for the publisher. Most American publishing houses term a translation as "work made for hire", where "the employer or person for whom the work was prepared is considered the author ... and unless the parties have expressly agreed otherwise in a written instrument signed by them, owns all the rights comprised in the copyright" (10). So the translator has to hand over the finished 'product' to the publisher, and she has no claim over it after that.

Translators are bound by contract to hand over the finished product to the publishing house, and have no claims over the work after that. This gets reflected in payment also.

This also affects the matter of payment. In most cases, translators are paid per thousand words, or per printed page (which is usually 500 – 600 words in case of a normal sized book). After this flat one-time payment, the translator does not get anything even if the book does very well in the market and goes for repeated editions. The author, on the other hand, gets a royalty for each edition. There are other possibilities for a published book, like the license to a paperback publisher or agreement with a film production company. The translator is a non-player in all these cases. Most of these conditions are replicated in the Indian translation scenario also, although Indian publishing houses bring out more titles in translation.

Because of the unpredictable nature of the income, most translators cannot survive on doing translations alone. They are forced to churn out more in their bid to earn more, which results in mediocre work at best. The economics of the marketplace does not ensure the quality of the translators. Publishing houses that demand translations hire translators who are willing to do the work according to the terms they lay down. Very often these are translators who have no other qualification than the fact that they know two languages, and not more. Quality is often compromised in the race to meet deadlines and hit the market first.

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Publication of translations

We have already seen how the publication of translations works in India. The translation publication scene is quite vibrant, as translations constitute a significant part of what we call Indian literature. Of course there is the reality that most of the translations are into English rather than Indian languages because of the status that English enjoys vis a vis Indian languages in India. The number of regional language publishing houses that publish translations is less than those publishing English translations. Penguin India and Katha are the prominent firms that publish English translations, but their forays into regional languages are rare. In fact, Penguin once ventured into Malayalam publishing, but did not go beyond a few titles. English is still the dominant language in India.

At the international level as well as in India, translations form a small part of the total number of books brought out by a publishing house.

The hegemony of English is seen in a different way in Britain and the U.S. Translations form but an insignificant part of Anglo-American literature, and amount to about four percent of the total literature published there. In comparison, France has 12% and Germany about 15%. (It has to be stated here that these are figures from the 1990s and given by Venuti; things must have changed by now). However, the passage of years has not dented the status of English as a global language. Writers and their writings gain visibility only after they are published in English, even if they are Nobel Prize awardees. The publication figures for translations in the Anglo-American world point to the power dynamics at work in the relationship between languages of the world.

Venuti is of the view that “these translation patterns point to a trade imbalance with serious cultural ramifications” (14). British and American publishers who travel to international book fairs like the Frankfurt Book Fair usually sell the translation rights for English books. But the number of translation rights they buy is very low. Their interest is only in books that promise to be bestsellers. In this context it is interesting to remember the huge advance that Vikram Seth got for his book. This is probably because the ‘exotic’ nature of Indian English books ensure a certain readership. Translations are thought to be financially ‘risky’ because they do not fetch the readership that English books do.

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Impact of translation trends

This trend towards English books that we see in the Anglo-American world indicates a smug belief in the superiority of English and an unwillingness to acknowledge or receive different cultures. Even as Anglophone readers read the English translation of a foreign work, the emphasis on the quality of fluency makes sure that they are not made aware of the ‘foreignness’ of the work they are reading. As Venuti puts it, these fluent translations “invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” (15). Irritating differences are smoothed over and readers are made to feel that they are reading a work in their own language.

If the translator has to become visible, she has to resort to the foreignizing strategy in translation.

Perhaps the strategy that a translator can adopt to counter the domesticating trend is ‘foreignization’ or the strategy that Schleiermacher advocated. This would carry over the peculiarities of the foreign language to the target reader, without letting her forget that she is reading a translation. But this will not result in smooth and readable texts, and does not agree with the profit motive behind book publication and selling.

Publishers driven by the logic of the marketplace encourage the publication of ‘smooth’ translations. The translation like all other books becomes a commodity to be sold. Unfortunately the logic is dictated by the Anglo-American world and works to the disadvantage of other languages. The translator becomes an invisible figure in this power play which has English as the dominant language. As Venuti points out: “Behind the translator’s invisibility is a trade imbalance that underwrites this domination [of English], but also decreases the cultural capital of foreign values in English by limiting the number of foreign texts translated and submitting them to domesticating revision” (17). Translation here becomes a replication of global power politics at play

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Assignments

1. How is the translator's invisibility indicative of the larger politics of globalization?
2. Assess the status of your mother-tongue with respect to English in India. Take into account the trends in translation between your language and English.

Reference

Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1993. rpt. 1995

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