

Translation: Politics and Problems

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Abstract

Mitra highlights the point that any translation done from Source Language (SL) to Target Language (TL) acknowledges the existence of boundaries between cultures and also accepts that there exists a shared zone of reverberation among diverse ethnic groups without which translations could never reach far out. But every culture has its own boundaries. A translator is aware of these boundaries and the stipulation of crossing them. These boundaries are not impassable but are flexible that offer entry at many points, if not at every one of them. Translation involves decoding and decoding involves lot of difficulties.

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When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his/her mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words s/he really knows. In this sense translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two tongues and the histories of all peoples parallel to the child's experience.¹

I begin with a quotation from Octavio Paz that is fundamental to translation. Octavio Paz claims that translation is the principal means we have of understanding the world we live in:

Thanks to translation that we become aware that our neighbors do not speak and think as we do. On the one hand the world is presented to us as a collection of similarities on the other as a heap of growing texts, each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence is already a translation first from the non-verbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase.²

Here we have an unbiased acknowledgement that translation as our principal compartment to understanding the world around us. We also have here a very positive

1 Octavio Paz, "Translation: Literature and Letters" (Trans. Irene del Corral), Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, (eds.), in *Theories of Translation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp.152-62.

2 *Ibid.*

approach towards translation after the long depressive verdict and the scorning of a translated text as 'secondary', 'mechanical', 'substitute' and 'copy'.

Translation Studies today have re-evaluated the power relationship between the writer, the reader and the translator. The notion of the death of the author predictably led to the death of the original, and once the original has ceased to be, its translations could no longer be perceived as subsidiary to it. The translator was released as well from the service to an all-powerful source.

Etienne Dolet's (1509-46) *La maniere de bien trduire d'une langue en aultre* (the way to translate well from one language to another - 1540) is one of the earliest treatises on translation in a modern European language. Dolet in his treatise had laid down five basic rules of good translation. First and foremost of the rules is that the translator must thoroughly understand the subject matter and the meaning of the source text. This is to evade obscurity and produce candid translation. Secondly, the translator must have perfect knowledge not only of the source language but also of the target language to be able to get across with the translation that he or she is attempting. This point ensures that language should not be a hindrance to the translator. Thirdly, and most significantly, the translator must not enter into the 'slavery' of translating word for word. As Susan Bassnett has pointed out, the metaphor has served to reinforce Dolet's assertion that the relationship between writer and translator is one of parity and not one of subservience.³

Dolet's fourth point which is also significant as it concerns the development of vernacular languages that was a vital issue during Renaissance Humanist Europe. Dolet proposed that the translator should be adequately bold to use the language of 'common currency' and should avoid archaisms or excessive Latinisms. Finally, the translator should use the figures of speech and attend to the arrangement of words so that the text appears harmonious to the readers.⁴

Susan Bassnett in her *The Meek and Mighty: Reappraising the Role of the Translator* informs us that six years after the publication of the five rules for good translation that could be included into larger project on the art of poetry, Dolet was hanged and burned at the stake. His accusers condemned him to death for heresy, on account of his translation, and surprisingly for us, it was not for any Christian text, but for a text by Plato. Theo Herman wrote that the seeds of Dolet's distraction were already visible in these five rules for Dolet was promoting not merely a set of convenient guiding principle for translators but also a drastic cultural strategy.

Another important figure similarly attentive to the power of translation as a shaping force in culture was Sir Thomas Moore (1477-1535). Moore in his polemic writing

3 Cfr. Bassnett Susan, "The Meek and Mighty: Reappraising the Role of the Translator", Roman Alverez and MCarmen-Africa Vidal, (eds.), in *Translation, Power, Subversion*, Philadelphia, Multilingual Matters Limited, 1996.

4 *Ibid.*

against the Bible translator William Tyndale (1494-1536) who was also eventually burnt at the stake in Antwerp for heretical translation activities has shown how the delicate use of words could modify the readings of scriptures:

He changed the word church into this word congregation, because he would bring it in question which were church and set forth Luther's heresy that the church which we should all believe and obey, is not the common known body of all Christian realms remaining in the faith of Christ...And that he changed priest into senior because he intended to set forth Luther's heresy teaching that priesthood is no sacrament but the office of lay man or a lay woman appointed by the people to preach. And that he changed penance into repenting because he would set forth Luther's heresy teaching that penance is no sacrament.⁵

Moore's attack on Tyndale renders the ideological implications of translation practice. A culture scrutinizes translation with particular alertness wherever the translated text is allegedly seen as central to that culture. Therefore, the Bible, especially during the period of the Reformation, came under fastidious inspection, and translators were held responsible for deviation from accepted normative meanings and, in some cases, were ruthlessly punished.

Dolet had rejected the notion of enslavement of the translator to the source text. The representation of the translator as a slave obliged to obey the source text and its author developed later in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, during the era of the great colonial expansion outside Europe. Dryden in the dedication to his translation of *The Aenid* (1697) wrote that translators were slaves forced to 'labour on another man's plantation'. The invention of printing gave the author a new status as the owner or proprietor of the book. Many books like that of Malory's *Morte d' Arthur*, that refer throughout to unspecified source texts without reserve was replaced with the concept of the original text along with the concept of proprietorship. Dryden's complaint is coherent because during his time translation was envisaged as double-tongue-learning-exercise and the success of the translated work was credited in accordance with the translator's adherence to the source text. The idea that translation was an inferior kind of writing persisted throughout till the twentieth century when there was a radical change in the way of looking at translators from people who hung about the margins to an acknowledgment of the vital role that translators play in the imperative interpretive process.

After Derrida we all have come to acknowledge that there can be no absolute meaning and therefore no uncontested original. Text is simply a play of multiple meanings:

Difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation: a regulated transformation of one

5 Cfr. Andre Lefevere (ed.), *Translation/History/Culture, A Sourcebook*, London, Routledge, 1992.

language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact never had, to do with some 'transport' of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one".⁶

In this age of globalization and mass communication where multi-media experiences are making the world smaller everyday, we as audience want to share the latest text, be it books, movies, or songs. The giant step of English as a world language has in no way reduced the necessity or the scope of translation. But as we have seen, translation was, and even now is, seen as manipulation. We know by now that the point of view of white males cannot be universal point of view and that a text is culture bound. A translation can therefore create a cross-cultural reception of a text and can manipulate the socio-cultural political acceptance or equally its non-acceptance in the target culture by using or not using the process of translation objectively. Seen in these terms the translator's task that domesticates the foreign text, making it comprehensible and even familiar to the target language readers, providing them with the conceited experience of recognizing his or her own cultural other role can never be judged as naïve. Extending the argument a little further we may deduce that translation, therefore, can be seen only as a manipulation of ST into a particular model of TT ideally without any pressure of a superior culture over another, but it always implies an unstable balance between the power one culture can exert over another.

Translation thus is not a simple chore or rewriting a text in another tongue but involves a complex process of a rewriting that takes into account the implications of language people have in the other tongue and to strike a balance between the power that exists between the two cultures, for every linguistic community also has its own set of values, norms and classifications that will differ from the target culture.

While we gain cerebral pleasure from discussing at length on Manipulation School or Polysystem Theory in some cases the translators are simply left helpless because despite all notions of common cultural resonance zones, and granted that all translation is not manipulation, there are expressions peculiar to a language which cannot be rendered in another tongue. Therefore there are lapses and deliberate ellipses. For instance, while translating Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day / Thou art more lovely and more temperate" Sudhindranath Dutta rendered :

[Basonto diner sone koribo ki tomar tulona ?
Tumi aro komoniyo, aro snigdh, nomro sukumar]
Then where goes temperate?
Bishnu Dey had found out an equivalent when he wrote :
[Tomar upoma debo naki basonter dine?
Tumi aro romoniyo site ushne aro je sushom] ⁷

6 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, in Alan Brass (trans.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p.20.

7 Cfr. Ashru Kumar Sikdar, *Adhunik Kobitar Digboloy*, Kolkata, Aaruna Prakashani, 1996.

While 'sushom' can be treated as an equivalent to temperate it is for the readers to judge which version of the translations they like best. Besides such problems of decoding a translation is often marred by individual differences in restructuring. Shakti Chattopadhyay has been translated by Shankarlal Bhattacharjee (*Departures*) as well as by Jayanta Mahapatra (*I can but why should I go?*)

Both Shankarlal Bhattacharjee and Jayanta Mahapatra have translated the title poem of the volume *Jete pari kintu keno Jabo*. Lines from their translation will bring out the individual differences in restructuring.

The second stanza of the poem reads: "*Ekhon khader pashe rattier darale, chaand dake aye aye, ekhon gangar teere ghumonto darele, chitakath daake aye aye*".⁸ Shankarlal Bhattacharjee has rendered it as:

Now when I stand near the gorges at nighttime
I hear the moon calling come hither, come hither, come!
Now sleepily I stand on banks of the Ganga
The logs of the funeral pyre beckon...
Come over, come.⁹

Jayanta Mahapatra has shown himself an adroit craftsman even in translation. He writes: "Now when I stand beside the pit at night, the moon calls out: Come! Now when I stand drowsy on the Ganga's bank, the wood of the pyre calls: Come!".¹⁰

Sometime there are gaps or what we call lapses in translations. These lapses or gaps are not always the translator's lack of skill but more often they are limitations inherent in the language structure. Shakti Chattopadhyay's *ebong Mora chaite paare ekkushi jal* (*Mrityu*) reads when rendered into English: "and the corpse may reach out for a drop of water!" (Jayanta Mahapatra: *Death*). The Bengali word *kushi* has a religious connotation that is lacking in 'a drop'. The translators sometimes overcome this problem by using the original word and adding a footnote. Radice retains many Bengali words in his translations of Tagore. We have: *sadhu, zamindar, bighas, tamal, bakul, madhavi*. We discern an interesting phenomenon here, that of the subaltern language penetrating the colonial.

Many writers such as Gabriel Gracia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges and Carlos Fuentes are all praises for translation and sees it not as a marginal activity but as a primary one. Translation tackles some most important cultural problems, such as that of understanding racism, to understanding of the exotic, not in terms of fake fantasies but as a historical reality. Contemporary translation studies are aware of the need to examine in depth the relationship between the production of knowledge in a given culture and its transmission, relocation and reinterpretation in the target culture.

8 Cfr. Shakti Chattopadhyay, *Jete Pari Kintu Keno Jabo*, Kolkata, Ananada Publishers, 1999.

9 Cfr. Shankarlal Bhattacharjee (Trans.), *Departures*, The Last Poems of Shakti Chattopadhyay, Kolkata, Gangchil, 2005.

10 Cfr. Jayanata Mahapatra (Trans.), *I can but why should I go*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1994.