

“Translation and Literary History: An Indian View”

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(Eds.) Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi

‘Translation is the wandering existence of a text in a perpetual exile,’ says J. Hillis Miller¹. The statement obviously alludes to the Christian myth of the Fall, exile and wandering. In Western metaphysics translation is an exile, a fall from the origin; and the mythical exile is a metaphoric translation, a post-Babel crisisⁱⁱⁱ. Given this metaphysical precondition of Western aesthetics, it is not surprising that literary translations are not accorded the same status as *original works*. Western literary criticism provides for the guilt of translations for coming into being *after* the original; the temporal sequentiality is held as a proof of diminution of literary authenticity of translations. The strong sense of individuality given to Western individuals through systematic philosophy and the logic of social history makes them view translation as an intrusion of ‘the other’^{iv} (sometimes pleasurable). This intrusion is desirable to the extent that it helps define one’s own identity, but not beyond that point. It is of course natural for the monolingual European cultures to be acutely conscious of the act of translation. The philosophy of individualism and the metaphysics of guilt, however, render European literary historiography incapable of grasping the origins of literary traditions.

One of the most revolutionary events in the history of English style has been the authorized translation of the Bible. It was also the literary expression of Protestant Christianity. The recovery of the original spirit of Christianity was thus sought by Protestant England through an act of translation. It is well known that Chaucer was translating the style of Boccaccio into English when he created his *Canterbury Tales*. When Dryden and Pope wanted to recover a sense of order, they used the tool of translation. Similar attempts were made in other European languages such as German and French.

During the last two centuries the role of translation in communicating literary movements across linguistic borders has become very important. The tradition that has given us writers like Shaw, Yeats, Joyce, Beckett and Heaney in a single century – the tradition of Anglo-Irish literature – branched out of the practice of translating Irish works into English initiated by Macpherson towards the end of the eighteenth century. Indian English Literature

too has gathered its conventions of writing from the Indological activity of translation during the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century. Many of the Anglo-Irish and Indian English writers have been able translators themselves. Similarly the settler colonies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand have impressive modern traditions of literature, which have resulted from the 'translation' of the settlers from their homeland to alien locations. Post-colonial writing in the former Spanish colonies in South America, the former colonies in Africa and other parts of the world has experienced the importance of translation as one of the crucial conditions for creativity. Origins of literary movements and literary traditions inhabit various acts of translation.

Considering the fact that most literary traditions originate in translation and gain substance through repeated acts of translation, it would be useful for a theory of literary history if a supporting theory of literary translation were available. However, since translations are popularly perceived as unoriginal, not much thought has been devoted to the aesthetics of translation. Most of the primary issues relating to 'form' and 'meaning' too have not been settled in relation to translation. No critic has taken any well-defined position about the exact placement of translations in literary history. Do they belong to the history of the 'T' languages or do they belong to the history of the 'S' languages? Or do they form an independent tradition all by themselves? This ontological uncertainty which haunts translations has rendered translation study a haphazard activity which devotes too much energy discussing problems of conveying the original meaning in the altered structure.

Unfortunately for translation, the various developments concerning the interdependence between meaning and structure in the field of linguistics have been based on monolingual data and situations. Even the sophisticated and revolutionary theoretical formulation proposed by structural linguistics is not adequate to unravel the intricacies of translation activity. Roman Jakobson in his essay on the linguistics of translation proposed a threefold classification of translations: (a) those from one verbal order to another verbal order within the same language system, (b) those from one language system to another language system, and (c) those from a verbal order to another system of signs (Jakobson, 1959, pp. 232–9). As he considers, theoretically, a complete semantic equivalence as the final objective of a translation act – which is not possible – he asserts that poetry is untranslatable. He maintains that only a 'creative translation' is possible. This view finds further support in formalistic poetics, which considers every act of creation as a completely unique event. It is,

however, necessary to acknowledge that synonymy within one language system cannot be conceptually identical with synonymy between two different languages. Historical linguistics has some useful premises in this regard. In order to explain linguistic change, historical linguistics employs the concept of semantic differentiation as well as that of phonetic glides. While the linguistic changes within a single language occur more predominantly due to semantic differentiation, they also show marked phonetic glides. However, the degree of such glides is more pronounced when a new language comes into existence. In other words, whereas linguistic changes within a single language are predominantly of a semantic nature, the linguistic differences between two closely related languages are predominantly phonetic. Technically speaking, then, if synonymy within one language is a near impossibility, it is not so when we consider two related languages together.

Structural linguistics considers language as a system of signs, arbitrarily developed, that tries to cover the entire range of significance available to the culture of that language. The signs do not mean anything by or in themselves; they acquire significance by virtue of their relation to the entire system to which they belong. This theory naturally looks askance at translation which is an attempt to rescue/ abstract significance from one system of signs and to wed it with another such system. But language is an open system. It keeps admitting new signs as well as new significance in its fold. It is also open in the socio-linguistic sense that it allows an individual speaker or writer to use as much of it as he can or likes to do. If this is the case, then how 'open' is a particular system of verbal signs when a bilingual user, such as a translator, rends it open? Assuming that for an individual language resides within his consciousness, we can ask whether the two systems within his consciousness can be shown as materially different and whether they retain their individual identities within the sphere of his consciousness. Or do such systems become a single open and extended system? If translation is defined as some kind of communication of significance, and if we accept the structuralist principle that communication becomes possible because of the nature of signs and their entire system, it follows that translation is a merger of sign systems. Such a merger is possible because systems of signs are open and vulnerable. The translating consciousness exploits the potential openness of language systems; and as it shifts significance from a given verbal form to a corresponding but different verbal form it also brings closer the materially different sign systems. If we take a lead from phenomenology and conceptualize a whole community of 'translating consciousness' it should be possible to develop a theory of interlingual synonymy as well as a more perceptive literary historiography.

The concept of a ‘translating consciousness’^v and communities of people possessing it are no mere notions. In most Third World countries, where a dominating colonial language has acquired a privileged place, such communities do exist. In India several languages are simultaneously used by language communities as if these languages formed a continuous spectrum of signs and significance. The use of two or more different languages in translation activity cannot be understood properly through studies of foreign-language acquisition. Such theories work round the premise that there inevitably is a chronological gap and an order or a priority of scale in language- learning situations. The field is stratified in terms of value-based indicators L1 and L2, though in reality language-learning activity may seem very natural in a country like India. In Chomsky’s linguistics the concept of semantic universals plays an important role. However, his level of abstraction marks the farthest limits to which the monolingual Saussurean linguistic materialism can be stretched. In actual practice, even in Europe, the translating consciousness treats the SL and TL as parts of a larger and continuous spectrum of various intersecting systems of verbal signs. Owing to the structuralist unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of any non-systemic or extra-systemic core of significance, the concept of synonymy in the West has remained inadequate to explain translation activity. And in the absence of a linguistic theory based on a multilingual perspective or on translation practice, the translation thought in the West overstates the validity of the concept of synonymy.

J.C. Catford presents a comprehensive statement of theoretical formulation about the linguistics of translation in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, in which he seeks to isolate various linguistic levels of translation. His basic premise is that since translation is a linguistic act any theory of translation must emerge from linguistics: ‘Translation is an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another; clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language – a general linguistic theory’ (Catford, 1965, p. vii). The privileged discourse of general linguistics today is closely interlinked with developments in anthropology, particularly after Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss. During the nineteenth century, Europe had distributed various fields of humanistic knowledge into a threefold hierarchy: comparative studies for Europe, Orientalism for the Orient, and anthropology for the rest of the world. In its various phases of development modern Western linguistics has connections with all these. After the ‘discovery’ of Sanskrit by Sir William Jones, historical linguistics in Europe depended heavily on Orientalism. For a long time afterwards linguistics followed the path of comparative

philology. And after Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, linguistics started treating language with an anthropological curiosity. When linguistics branched off to its monolingual structuralist path, comparative literature still persisted in its faith in the translatability of literary texts. Comparative literature implies that between two related languages there are areas of significance that are shared, just as there may be areas of significance that can never be shared. Translation can be seen as an attempt to bring a given language system in its entirety as close as possible to the areas of significance that it shares with another given language or languages. All translations operate within this shared area of significance. Such a notion may help us distinguish synonymy within one language and the shared significance between two related languages.

The translation problem is not just a linguistic problem. It is an aesthetic and ideological problem with an important bearing on the question of literary history. Literary translation is not just a replication of a text in another verbal system of signs. It is a replication of an ordered sub-system of signs within a given language in another corresponding ordered sub-system of signs within a related language. Translation is not a transposition of significance or signs. After the act of translation is over, the original work still remains in its original position. Translation is rather an attempted revitalization of the original in another verbal order and temporal space. Like literary texts that continue to belong to their original periods and styles *and* also exist through successive chronological periods, translation at once approximates the original and transcends it.

The problems in translation study are, therefore, very much like those in literary history. They are the problems of the relationship between origins and sequentiality. And as in translation study so in literary history, the problem of origin has not been tackled satisfactorily. The point that needs to be made is that probably the question of origins of literary traditions will have to be viewed differently by literary communities with 'translating consciousness'. The fact that Indian literary communities do possess this translating consciousness can be brought home effectively by reminding ourselves that the very foundation of modern Indian literatures was laid through acts of translation, whether by Jayadeva, Hemcandra, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, H.N. Apte or Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

We began our discussion by alluding to the Christian metaphysics that conditions reception of translation in the Western world. Let us allude to Indian metaphysics in

conclusion. Indian metaphysics believes in an unhindered migration of the soul from one body to another. Repeated birth is the very substance of all animate creations. When the soul passes from one body to another, it does not lose any of its essential significance. Indian philosophies of the relationship between form and essence, structure and significance are guided by this metaphysics. The soul, or significance, is not subject to the laws of temporality; and therefore significance, even literary significance, is ahistorical in Indian view. Elements of plot, stories, characters, can be used again and again by new generations of writers because Indian literary theory does not lay undue emphasis on originality. If originality were made a criterion of literary excellence, a majority of Indian classics would fail the test. The true test is the writer's capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original. And in that sense Indian literary traditions are essentially traditions of translation.

Note: ¹ I have quoted here from my notes of a lecture given by Professor J. Hills Miller at the IX Centenary Celebration Symposium of the University of Bologna, Italy, in October 1988. I have quoted his words without any changes.

References

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Jakobson, R. (1959) 'On linguistic aspects of translation', in R.A. Brower, (ed.), *On Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

ENDNOTES (FOR STUDENTS)

ⁱ Ganesh Devy(1950-) critic, thinker, editor, educator, activist. He was a Professor of English at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (1980-96). In 1996, he gave up his academic career in order to initiate work with the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT) and adivasis. His first full length book in English *After Amnesia* was hailed as a classic in literary theory. Since its publication, he has written and edited close to ninety influential books *In Another Tongue* (1993) and *Of Many Heroes* (1998) and many others in areas as diverse as Literary Criticism, Translation, Anthropology, Education, Linguistics and Philosophy, and is engaged in the documentation and study of the languages and literature of tribal communities in India. His latest book is *The Crisis Within*:

Knowledge and Education in India (2017) which addresses the plight of educational institutions and the need to generate knowledge appropriate to India.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Post-Babel crisis: The biblical story of the ‘Tower of Babel’ in the Book of Genesis (11: 1-9) is one of the most famous mythological stories related to the origin of translation. According to the story, the descendants of Norah committed a sin after the Great Flood when they failed to create society befitting God’s will. Instead, they built a tower to reach heaven and challenge His authority. The Tower was destroyed by God who then scattered them to different parts of the world and made them speak different languages, thus creating a need for translation to understand each other.

^{iv} ‘the other’:

“In Lacan’s theory, the other – with the small ‘o’ – designates the other who resembles the self, which the child discovers when it looks in the mirror and becomes aware of itself as a separate being. When the child, which is an uncoordinated mass of limbs and feelings sees its image in the mirror, that image must bear sufficient resemblance to the child to be recognized, but it must also be separate enough to ground the child’s hope for an ‘anticipated mastery’; this fiction of mastery will become the basis of the ego. This other is important in defining the identity of the subject. In post-colonial theory, it can refer to the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’.”

From: Bill Ashcroft et al. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed. 2007.

^v ‘The multilingual, eclectic Hindu spirit, ensconced in the belief in the soul’s perpetual transition from form to form, may find it difficult to subscribe to the Western metaphysics of translation The Indian consciousness, on the other hand, and in a crude manner of differentiating, is itself a “translating consciousness”’ (G.N. Devy, ‘Translation Theory: an Indian Perspective’ 1993, p. 135).

Also, “The extent to which bilingual literary production has been accepted in India as a normal literary behaviour, and the historical length of the existence of such practice are indicative of India’s “translating consciousness” (136)
