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Translation as a Blending of Cultures

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to consider translation as a blending of cultures. This paper argues that a translation will never be fair if something new has not been added to it. Therefore, a degree of cultural interface between two language groups (from English to Indian languages, i.e., Bengali, Marathi) is required for translating any text. This paper also describes translation philosophies from nineteenth century India, when the colonial agenda of translating indigenous texts was a part of a larger enterprise of Imperialism, to recent times when the attempt has been to rescue the work of translation from the restrictions imposed by the rhetoric of technical rules regarding transference from Source Language to Target Language. The result is one of blending of the culture of the Source Language of the original text with the conventions and culture of the Target Language, resulting in a translation that is not an exact translation of the original text but that will provide a faithful cultural understanding of the text in the minds of the Target Language readers.

It is an acknowledged statement that every reading is an interpretation and every interpretation is a decoding of the text. Translation, then, needs to be considered a simultaneous process of decoding and encoding. While it decodes the meaning embedded in the text of the Source Language (SL) it also transfers the meaning into a coded form in the Target Language (TL). Thus every translation becomes an extension of the original text, bringing fresh appreciation to it, as well as enrichment to the TL. However, such a process needs to be clearly recognized, not as a mere mechanical transference from one linguistic register to another but as an encounter between two languages and two cultures. A whole range of latent socio-cultural responses between two linguistic registers is brought to the surface through the process of translation. Jiří Levý, of the late Prague School, states in his *Art of Translation (1963)*:

> A translation is not a monistic composition, but an interpenetration and conglomerate of two structures. On the one hand there are the semantic content and the formal contour of the original, on the other hand the entire system of aesthetic features bound up with the language of the translation. (Levý 1963, cited in Bassnett-McGuire 1980:5-6)

It is thus necessary to consider the Art of Translation as a two way process: to appreciate and assess the original text and then to create a fresh text in a different language. Susan Bassnett-McGuire, while defining the process adopts the modern approach: "…first, that the surface meaning of the two, i.e., the Source Language and Target Language will be approximately similar; and second, that the linguistic structures of the two need to be preserved" (Bassnett-McGuire 1980:2). Such a statement resonates with the idea that the process of translation is a technical skill and needs to be acquired through scientific training in the two linguistic groups. Although this approach characterizes much of the translation work done in recent times, Bassnett-McGuire and many others try to keep open minds and acknowledge the necessity of considering the specific context in which the original text exists. Apart from the attention directed to the technical skill

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involved, translation further involves the transference of meaning contained in one language into another, keeping in mind the cultural roots of each language.

Translation as an art form has a long history separate from the subject of translation theory and translation studies. From olden times knowledge has been enriched through the process of transmission and dissemination of ancient and classical texts. For instance, the ancient Indian epics were translated into various modern Indian languages, Greek and Latin texts into more recent European languages, and ancient Arabic and Persian texts into modern languages. In more specific terms: in the third century A.D., Kalidas transformed an episode from the ancient epic *Mahabharata* into a Sanskrit play *Shakuntala Abhijnanam*, which was then translated through the ages in several Indian languages, e.g., Bengali, Marathi. In the nineteenth century William Jones translated the text into English and this was followed by various translations into European languages. The German translation by Goethe is still considered to be one of the finest.

The transmission of the Holy Bible is one of the more interesting cases. The original Bible, the Old Testament, was written in Aramaic, an ancient language of Syria, followed by Samaritan and Hebrew texts in fifth century B.C. The Greek Septuagint Bible was translated in the third century B.C. This was further translated into Latin by St. Jerome in fourth century A.D. and was known as the Vulgate Bible. In the Medieval Age it was translated by Bede, followed by Wycliffe into vernacular English. Cranmer's Bible, known as the Great Bible, appeared in 1539. It was only in 1611 that the Authorised Bible in the English version under James I finally made it available to the common people.

Another fascinating history of transmission is that of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The text was first available in Arabic in a translation by one Abu'l Bashar (990-1037) from a Syriac translation by Averroes. It was from this version that it was translated into German by Hermanus in 1236, followed by Valla's Latin translation in 1498. Further, Spanish and Italian translations by translators such as Castelvetro, Minturno and Scaliger came in the fifteenth century before the text penetrated into English language and literature during the Renaissance.[†] To end the illustrations on a lighter vein, it is worth mentioning Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of a Rose*, a fascinating account of the search for the lost text of Comedy by Aristotle, became a fictionalized version of the investigative process involved in transmission of ancient texts.

The question with regard to such transmission and translation is not how accurate these versions are but what material has accrued to these texts in the process. Though some of the original texts have arrived in a garbled state or have been misreadings or misinterpretations, the fact remains that they would have been totally lost without the translations.

The problem of equivalence leads directly to the debate of whether translation is an Art Form or needs to be considered as a Craft. As argued earlier, the translator not only makes syntactic adjustments between the original language and that of his own but attempts to effectively communicate the semantic significance embedded in the text. Walter Benjamin states in his *Illuminations* (1970:73) that the SL and the TL need to change to make a third revised version. Translation is a process of transformation and renewal of something living into something even more dynamic and organic. He further argues, ". . . no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original." Just as fictional representation can never be a photocopy of reality and remains in the realm of imaginative recreation, similarly translation ought not to be an exact replica of the original. It will never be a fair translation if something new has not been added to it.

This further raises the question of translatability of the text. All texts in question would lend themselves to translation if there were a translator capable of working in both the source language and culture and the receptor language and culture. For instance, I can translate in English from my native language, and vice versa, but it would be foolish on my part to attempt to translate a text into Chinese simply because I have not been sufficiently exposed to their linguistic register and culture. Syntactic equivalence needs to take into account the subtle nuances and the idiomatic expressions of the source language. Imagine the situation

[†]Since these are areas of higher study, it will not be possible to provide the entire range of references. Students keen to check them may, however, look up the Introduction to any Bible, and J.W.H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism,* Cambridge, 1943.

if Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* were to be translated as a straight adventure tale, or one of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Hamlet,* for example, were rendered simply as a tragic story. However, the fact remains that generations of Indian students have grown up on a translation of Swift's work as an adventure story with no awareness of the satire involved in it. Yet there is an excellent adaptation of *Comedy of Errors* by a well-known nineteenth century Bengali litterateur, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, entitled *Brhanti Bilas*. It was possible for him to do so because of the degree of interaction and acceptance of the cultural background of the source text, in this case by Shakespeare. Homi K. Bhabha, the Culture Studies critic, makes an apt comment in this connection: "Cultural translation is not simply an appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems and values, by departing from their habitual or 'inbred' rules of transformation" (Bhabha 1994:27).

Translation was a major enterprise in nineteenth century Britain on account of the need to educate the rising middle classes and to familiarize them with the ancient and classical European texts. An enormous number of such texts were translated and made available with unprecedented rapidity. This was facilitated by the fact that cultural and traditional links existed from olden times in the West. As the number of translated texts increased at the popular level, translation began to come under scrutiny and criticism from the major literary figures of the Victorian period. Thus Matthew Arnold warns the would-be translator in his essay "On translating Homer":

> Let not the translator, then, trust to his notions of what the ancient Greeks would have thought of him; he will lose himself in vague. Let him not trust to what the ordinary English reader thinks of him; he will be taking the blind for his guide. Let him not trust to his own judgment of his own work; he may be misled by his individual caprices. Let him ask how his work affects those who both know Greek and can appreciate poetry…. (Arnold 1914:247)

However, a second level of translation enterprise arose out of colonial expansionism that increasingly began to demand recognition. In nineteenth century colonial India, for instance, translation was considered one of the major forms of cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. The prevalent belief was that the two could be brought close through such linguistic encounters. An excellent example of this East/West dialogue is W. B. Yeats' enthusiasm and praise of Tagore's self-translation of *Geetanjali* (*Song Offerings*) into English. It is well-known that his rendering from Bengali was quite disastrous, yet he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911. The response to this action was mixed. Edmund Gosse in a letter to Yeats described it as "a wise piece of imperialism." Obviously the award, though well deserved, was on the basis of a badly translated text and consequently is now considered an extension of "recognition to a subaltern culture" (Chaudhuri 2004:20). The encounter between two cultures under the hegemonic power of the colonizer is fraught with danger. Unless the status between the SL and the TL is recognized as being equal, a degree of misrepresentation is bound to occur. In 1857, Edward Fitzgerald wrote the following in a letter to his friend E. B. Cowell on his translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayaam*: "It is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who, (as I think), are not poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them" (Fitzgerald 1901:320). With such an attitude toward the SL and its culture, one seriously wonders if justice was done to the original text. Yet Fitzgerald's translation was immensely successful and vastly popular, and has been translated into all major languages. The Bengali version based on Fitzgerald is still very popular and considered the most authentic translation of the *Rubaiyat*.

Recent studies of some of these earlier translations indicate that these were often appropriations or distortions of the original texts to serve the interests of the dominant power structures operating within the country. In the Indian context, the colonial agenda of translating indigenous texts was part of a larger enterprise of Imperialism. Thus, translation was taken up as a scholarly activity with the assumption of the superiority of the TL while translating into English. It was also a means of encouraging the reader to return to the original in a transformed state. Furthermore, the attempt was to upgrade the SL text since it was perceived to be of lower status.

The initial British engagement with the study of the Bengali language was impelled by mercantile and commercial requirements. It was in their interest to know and learn the language for the collection of land revenue and business transactions, as the natives were thought to be highly unreliable in their dealings in

trade. Thus young East India Company agents were trained in local Indian and Persian languages and encouraged to read Sanskrit texts translated into English. Some of them became extremely proficient and engaged themselves in the work of translating from the Sanskrit and Persian texts. This accounts for the patronage granted by Warren Hastings to Sanskrit and Persian, the official court language at the time.

In the second phase of colonialism the agenda for translation was considerably changed. Translation was pursued in an organized manner and a two-way process was adopted: the Orientalist translation of Indian texts into English as well as those of English into Bengali. It was essential since the colonizers required a collaborative class to serve their purpose for administrative and economic reasons. Representations of the colonized were attempted in a manner in order to justify colonial domination. Thus the history of translation in India is very much interrelated with the idea of colonial expansionism. This was the period when certain myths regarding the orient were evolved that were to have serious repercussions on the future development of culture and national identity of the colonized country (Niranjana 1991:157). And translation was to play a significant role in this grand Imperial vision. However, the colonizer/colonized relationship is based on a concept of complete interdependence, one becoming completely meaningless without the other. Edward Said argues (1991:39) that that idea of "the orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."

A close examination of some of the translated texts of the Orientalists clearly establishes the colonial implications of such translations. What becomes apparent is the desire to "purify" Indian culture and to speak on its behalf since Indians were unreliable interpreters of their own history and culture. William Jones thus undertook a massive enterprise of translating the Sanskrit literary texts, Arabic texts on law, and Persian texts on grammar. The message was quite clear that he was retrieving these texts for a double purpose: to teach the Indians to better understand the value of their own texts and to further the Orientalists' concept of the orient. James Mill wrote *The History of British India* in three volumes tracing the history of "an anarchical India" needing "civilizing agency of the West for the improvement of the natives" (Mill 1826). Perhaps the best illustration is that of the famous/infamous "Education Minute" by Thomas Macaulay, who in 1835 had claimed that, a "single shelf of European books was worth the whole literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay 1957:716-718).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the growth of confidence in its imperial power and pride in national culture, translation was no longer necessary as a means of enriching British culture nor was it required to further enhance the exoticising of the orient. Translation came to be considered a debased form of art and the translator was relegated to the position of a mere craftsman and technician. Thus the twentieth century witnessed an obvious reaction to the idea of translation reduced to serve an ulterior purpose. The consequent shift had been to depoliticize, as it were, the entire process and approach it dispassionately as a mechanical craft, a mere transference from one linguistic structure to another with little or no reference to cultural and social history.

The attempt in recent times has been to rescue the work of translation from the restrictions imposed by the rhetoric of technical rules regarding transference from SL to TL. What has been introduced is the concept of free translation. Translation is not a mere reproduction of the meaning of the source text nor a literal rendering of the syntax contained in it, but an attempt to capture both with a degree of fidelity and freedom. Walter Benjamin, endorsing the concept of fidelity and freedom, claims (1970:73), "Real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block the light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original more fully."

In the process of writing the history of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, the obverse portrait reveals an entirely different story. Translations of English texts into specific Indian languages, e.g., Bengali, Marathi, reveal exciting narratives moving in fascinating directions. As a case study, one discovers that the translations of D. H. Lawrence's *Short stories and poetry in Bengali* have resulted in different forms of appreciation. During the colonial period, in the 1930s, when the East/West dialogue was firmly based on the concept of an exotic and mystic orient, Lawrence was described as a *Yogi* (Ghosh 1973:536) and his poetry was appreciated for its "mystical" qualities. In the postcolonial phase he was recognized as a revolutionary poet by the leading poets of Bengal in the 1950s. Thus Buddhadev Bose voices this new note by quoting from Lawrence's, *Look! We have come through!:*

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!

A fine wind is blowing the new direction of time

If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me

The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder

We shall find the Hesperides. (Bose: 1950:536)

Interesting developments have come from the systematic linguistic interface between English and the different Indian languages. During the colonial period English was the medium of instruction together with the various regional languages. It evolved as the major link language between the different regional languages. The constant interaction over a fairly long period resulted in the birth of Indian writings in English. In its initial stage it began as Indianised English in the works of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan and gradually evolved towards the sophisticated and elegant English of Vikram Seth, Amitava Ghose and Arundhuti Roy—all winners of international awards. These writers have internalized the entire process of translation and are no longer concerned with transference from one language to another but have adopted the language of translation as their own. There is, thus, a blending of the culture of the SL with the conventions and culture of the TL that results in a translation which, though not an exact transference of the original text, provides a faithful cultural understanding of the original in the minds of the TL readers.

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