

## Moving towards the Translational Turn in Cultural Studies

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### ABSTRACT

*It can be widely agreed that translation and translation studies have never had such a good and respectable place, as today. Over the last two to three decades, translation has become a more prolific, more visible, more respectable activity than perhaps ever before. Translation in no way remains restricted to binary relationships between national languages, national literatures or national cultures. And alongside translation itself, a new field of academic study has come into existence, initially called Translatology and now Translation Studies, which has gathered great academic momentum. The present paper will make an attempt to trace out the trajectory of growth of Translational Turn in Cultural Studies.*

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There has of course been translation for almost as long as there has been literature. But as Prof. Harish Triwedi points out in his essay "Translating Culture and Cultural Translation" that a new field of study is seen in our times to have become "well and truly established" when "not only monographs but Readers (or anthologies of primary and critical materials) and Encyclopedias of the subject begin coming out" and this had been happening steadily in Translation Studies over the last few years. To name a few we have, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies edited by Mona Baker (1998), The Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English by Olive Classe (2000), The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation edited by Peter France (2000) and the five volume History of Literary Translation into English, a project by the Oxford University Press.

But before these new developments took place, any study of translation was subsumed under either of the two different subjects or disciplines- Linguistics and Comparative Literature. Earlier translation was looked upon as something inferior or worthless. On translation was set alongside another translation of the so called original and then examined in terms of Linguistic equivalences, in a very formalist vacuum. As Susan Bassnett points out in "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies":

Once upon a time, the questions that were always being asked were 'How can translation be taught?' and 'How can translation be studied?' Those who regarded themselves as translators were often contemptuous of any attempts to teach translation, whilst those who claimed to teach often did not translate. (123)

In 1990, Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere edited a collection of essays *Translation, History and Culture*. They co-wrote the introductory essay which kind of served as a manifesto of what they saw a major change of emphasis in translation studies. They pointed out that the study of practice of translation had moved on from its formalist phase and was beginning to consider broader issues of "context, history and convention". While talking about this changed scenario the authors say that the object of study has been redefined; what is

studied is the text embedded in its network of both source and target cultural signs and in this way Translation Studies has been able to utilize the linguistic approach and to move beyond it.

This major shift of emphasis is what she calls as the "Cultural Turn in Translation Studies". They suggested that a study of the processes of translation, combined with a synthesis of its theory and practice could help us understand, how a text is selected for translation, role of translator in selection, role of editor or publisher and so on. The processes involved in translation have become the primary focus of translation studies and so it has changed its course and has become both broader and deeper.

In the 1970s, any study of translation occupied a minor corner of applied linguistics, and even more minor corner of literary studies and no position at all in the newly developing Cultural Studies. At that time there was clear demarcation between a work in Translation Studies and other types of literary or linguistic research. People were looking for equivalences between linguistics and literary systems, accuracy and faithfulness in translations- "definite translation" as Bassnett puts it. Translation was not taken seriously. Language used to discuss work in translation was very outdated when set against the new critical vocabularies that were dominating literary studies in general.

But shortly afterwards, it began to be noticed that literary texts were constituted not primarily of language but in fact of culture, language being in effect a vehicle of culture. In traditional discussions, the cruxes of translation, that is, the items which proved particularly intractable in translation, were often described as being "culture-specific" – for example *kurta*, *dhoti*, *roti*, *dharma*, all items peculiarly Indian and not really like the Western shirt, trousers, bread, deeds. But then the realization grew that not only were such particular items culture-specific but indeed the whole language was specific to the particular culture it belonged or came from, to some degree or the other. Thus, in a paradigmatic departure, the translation of a literary text became a transaction not between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic "substitution" as Catford had put it, but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures. The unit of

translation was no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text was constituted.

The first clear signal of change in wind was the Leuven Seminar of 1976. It brought together for the first time scholars from Israel working on polysystems theory with scholars in Low Countries and a handful of people from elsewhere in Europe. There Andre Lefevere was given the task of drawing up a definition of translation studies. The goal of the discipline according to him was to provide a comprehensive theory which can be used as a guideline for the production of translations. The theory would be dynamic and not static because it would always be in a state of continuous evolution. He was of the view that translations laid down in the theory might influence the development of receiving culture. So theory and practice were to be indissolubly intertwined. Even Bassnett says that theory and practice should always provide nourishment to each other. The very brief statement by Lefevere laid down some ground rules for the next stage in developing translation studies. Fundamental to this statement was a rejection of the old evaluative position and a refusal to locate translation studies in either strictly within literary studies or in linguistics. Susan says that what was effectively being proposed, though none of the proposers realized it at that time, was for translation studies to occupy a new space of its own.

Translation Studies shared common ground with the other rapidly developing interdisciplinary field- Cultural Studies. From its origin as a counter hegemonic movement within literary studies, challenging the dominance of a single concept of 'Culture' determined by a minority, the subject had moved by the late 1970s, shifting ground away from literature towards sociology. Richard Johnson, one of the pioneers of the subject warned against the dangers of splitting the sociological from the literary within cultural studies. He said that Cultural Studies must be interdisciplinary. In the words of Johnson:

Cultural processes do not correspond to the contours of academic knowledge as they stand. Cultural studies must be interdisciplinary or a-disciplinary in its tendency. Each approach tells us about one small aspect of a larger process. Each approach is theoretically partisan, but also very partial in its objects. (227)

And this is what the Leuven group was effectively saying about Translation Studies.

The Leuven group, in the earlier years favoured one particular approach, the polysystems approach to the study of literature by Itamar Even Zohar, an Israeli literary theorist. Polysystems comprises not only literary texts but other direct and indirect stake holders like readers, editors, publishers. According to literary polysystems approach literature is not just a collection of texts, but a set of factors governing the making, backing and greeting of these texts. Zohar pointed out that there was minimal research in the literary studies into the historical functions of the text not only translated text but also children's literature, detective fiction, romantic fiction and a host of other genres. Here again close parallels could be drawn between translation studies and cultural studies. First, both questioned the distinction made with traditional criticism between high and low culture. Secondly, both mounted a challenge to the concept of the literary canon. Third, both

argued to broaden the study of literature to include the functions of a text in a give context. Fourth, the terminology of high and low literature was challenged by both disciplines. Sussan argued that any study of literature that ignored works deemed to have no artistic merit was bound to be flawed; it would result in a completely inadequate picture of textual production and reception.

Zohar's contribution to the 1976 Leuven Seminar was a paper entitled "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystems"- this was a seminal text for scholars of Translation Studies, a new way of looking at translation. He says we need to ask questions why certain texts might be selected for translation at a given time and others ignored. How the translations might adopt specific norms and behaviors? For example we might ask- Why Tagore's Kabir was more important? Zohar says that here the old aesthetic argument does not hold, many factors must have been in play and the study of investigation of those factors should occupy the Translation Studies scholar. We can say that earlier translation was done for the sake of information. Britishers wanted to know Indians for colonial benefits, so literary texts were reduced to historical documents. After that Tagore came and it was a poet translating poet and not for the sake of information.

Translation became a major shaping force for change, a crucial instrument of literary renewal. The traditional literary history has tended to downplay this role of translation. Translation was considered a very thankless job. No publisher mentioned the name of translator on the cover page. But now this scenario has changed. Susan here gives the example of the case of European lyric poetry. Peter Dronke's *The Medieval Lyric* is a very erudite and immensely readable book that traces the development of the lyric across medieval Europe. It discusses the fusion of Roman and Catholic traditions, similarities and differences between religious and secular lyrical verse. However at no point does he ever discuss the role played by translation in the development and dissemination of the lyric. Unless we assume that all the singers and poets were multilingual, translation was involved as a major activity. Translation Studies approach to medieval lyric would ask different questions. It would look at the development of a literary form in terms of changing sociological patterns across Europe, like the end of feudalism, the rise of the city state etc.; in terms of history of language- the development of vernacular languages in Europe is connected with translation. Just as several centuries later, in the Renaissance the vernacular languages acquired a status equal to that of the classical languages due to a ferment of translation activity. Translation was thus intimately connected to the emergence of national vernaculars.

Anthony Easthope in his essay "But what is cultural studies?" argues that there have been three phases in the transformation of Cultural Studies since 1950s. The Culturalist phase of 1960s-where the goal was to broaden concepts of 'culture' to include other than canonical texts. The Structuralist phase, attention was shifted to the investigation of the relationship between textuality and hegemony. The Post-structuralist or Cultural Materialist phase of the last twenty years that reflects the recognition of cultural pluralism.

These three phases could just as well apply to Translation Studies over the last twenty years or so. In the Culturalist phase we see a paradigm shift in the way we look at

translation. Far from being an act of linguistic substitution, it became a more complex negotiation between two cultures. The polysystems phase in translation studies may be described as the Structuralist phase, for systems and structures dominated thinking for a time. While translation studies took on polysystems theory, cultural studies delved more deeply into gender theory and the study of youth cultures. In the 1980s the cultural studies expanded rapidly in many parts of the world- United States, Canada, Australia- changing and adapting as it moved.

Cultural Studies in its new internationalist phase turned to sociology, to ethnography and to history. Likewise, translation studies turned to ethnography and history and sociology to deepen the methods of analyzing what happens to texts in the process of translation- which Susan calls as –“intercultural transfer”. Mary Snell-Hornby also agrees on this when she says:

....within the discipline of translation studies even if not in public awareness, the term translation has since the early 1980s been broadened greatly from its original, strictly linguistic sense to include aspects of sociology, ethics, postcolonial studies, nonverbal communication, new fields of interest resulting from the process of globalization plus the advances of information technology and many other aspects. (48).

On the one hand translation becomes a condition for global relations of exchange, which Doris Bachmann-Medick calls “global translatability”, and on the other hand, a medium especially liable to reveal cultural differences, power imbalances and scope for action. Doris further says:

An explicit focus on translation process- something increasingly prevalent across humanities- may thus enable us to scrutinize more closely current and historical situations of cultural encounter as complex processes of cultural translation.(2)

Cultural Studies focuses on the notion of ‘value’ – aesthetic or material as culturally determined. The old idea was that the texts like that of Homer or Shakespeare had some kind of intrinsic value of their own because of which they could survive down the ages. They were presented as ‘monolithic universal writers’. When Cultural Studies developed the question of the conscious construction of aesthetic ideals acquired significance. In Translation studies also it can be seen that the transfer of texts across cultures by no means depends on the supposed intrinsic value of the text itself alone.

Susan gives the example of Homer and Shakespeare to show that if we consider both of them from within cultural studies or translation studies, what kind of questions would arise, other than that of their literary stature. In case of Homer we might need to ask how ancient texts have been handed down to us, how representative they might be, how they might have been read originally and by whom. We would also need to look into the translation of Homer and the role played by them in different literary systems. And the most significant question will be that today the learning of ancient Greek has declined then why Homer continues to occupy such significant position in literary hierarchy, even when almost nobody has access to his writings, except through translation. The idea of “universal greatness of a text” is deceptive. It is a fallacy. The translations

that are considered as definite at one moment in time can vanish without a trace a few years later. Certain hugely successful authors disappeared completely.

With the coming of Cultural studies and Translation studies it was realized that the whole notion of universal is politically constructed. Both these disciplines are concerned primarily with the questions of power relations and textual production. Both Cultural Studies and Translation Studies practitioners recognize the “importance of understanding the manipulatory processes that are involved in textual production” (Susan, “Constructing” 136).A writer does not just write in vacuum, he or she is the product of a particular culture, of a particular moment in time, and the writing reflects those factors such as race, gender, age, class and birthplace as well as the stylistic features of the individual. Moreover the material conditions in which the text is produced, sold, marketed and read also have a crucial role to play.

For the scholars of Translation Studies, translations, rather than being a secondary and derivative genre as the traditional Translation Schools argue, are instead one of the primary literary tools that larger institutions- educational systems, arts councils, publishing firms, and even governments have at their disposal to manipulate a given society in order to construct the kind of culture desired. The task of the translator is then less to copy an original text, but to re-create the source text in the construction of meaning and culture so as to achieve the goal of transmitting and constructing cultures, enabling different cultures to interact. In the book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, Andre Lefevere points out:

Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. (7)

Translation is also the primary method of imposing meaning while concealing the power relations that lie behind the production of that meaning. Translation imposes censorship and at the same time it intends to be a free and open rendering of the source text. For example the novels of Emily Zola were heavily cut and edited by translators and publishers when they first appeared in English. Laurence Venuti was of the opinion that every step in the translation process- from the selection of foreign texts, to edition, reading of translation is done according to the cultural values that circulate in the target language. Translation is always enmeshed in a set of power relations that exist both in the source and target contexts.

Susan says that the links between cultural studies and translation studies have remained insubstantial. While Translation Studies world has been slow to use the methods developed within Cultural Studies, the Cultural Studies world has been even slower in recognizing the value of research in the field of translation. Yet the parallels between these two important interdisciplinary fields and the overlap between them are so significant that they can no longer be ignored. “The cultural turn in translation studies happened more than a decade ago; the translation turn in cultural studies is now underway” (Susan, “Constructing” 136).

In the concluding part of the essay, Susan notes that these interdisciplines had moved beyond their Eurocentric beginnings

to enter a new internationalist phase and she also identifies a four-point common agenda that Translation studies and Cultural studies could together address.

- There needs to be more investigation of the acculturation process that takes place between cultures and the way in which different cultures construct their image of writers and texts.
- Tracking of the ways in which texts become cultural capital across cultural boundaries.
- An exploration of the politics of translation
- In the end she pleaded for a pooling of resources to extent research into intercultural training. And stressed again the commonality of the disciplinary method and thrust between Translation Studies and Cultural Studies.

Today the moment of isolated academic sitting in an ivory tower is over and indeed as Susan says in *Constructing Cultures*:

....in these multifaceted interdisciplines, isolation is counterproductive.... The study of translation, like the study of culture, needs a plurality of voices. And similarly, the study of culture always involves an examination of the processes of encoding and decoding that comprise translation. (138-39)

Thus translation is a two-world view, a dialogic encounter. This is what Mary Snell Hornby talks about in her essay "What's in a turn? On fits, starts and writhings in recent translation studies". At the Warwick Conference on "The translation turn in cultural studies" in November 2003 Hornby gave a lecture with the caption "Make dialogue, not war" (48). She was inspired by a placard held aloft in the streets of London in February 2003 during a demonstration against the imminent war in Iraq. It read "Make tea, not war", and it showed a caricature of the then British PM with a teacup on his head acting as a helmet (49). The same could be said of translation that its aim is constructive; to make dialogue rather than making war, which in its destructiveness is the exact opposite. Translation Studies is concerned not with language, objects or cultures as such, but with communication across cultures.

Mary Snell Hornby talks about the multimodal texts in her essay. Multimodal texts involve different modes of verbal and non verbal expressions, comprising both sight and sound, as in a drama or opera, written to be performed live on stage and of course for an audience. Many stage translators prefer to see themselves as poets or writers, considering the low prestige of translator's profession. Hornby says that as long as translation is viewed in the narrow sense of equivalent linguistic material, it will continue to play a marginal role, both in the minds of the general public and for scholars of other academic disciplines.

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Hornby raises another very relevant problem. She says that one reason people fail to understand what actually translation is, is because there is no precise, unambiguous definition of translation. She says that the words like these—turn, translation, norm, function, if we are to use them as technical terms in academic discourse should be clearly defined, precise and unambiguous, if they are to fulfill their function of promoting scholarly communication. Even within the English-speaking community it is often used in subtly different, sometimes even conflicting senses. This maybe partly be due to associations with school exercises and language classes.

In English, John Catford offered a precise linguistic definition of translation in 1965 as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" (20). This was absolutely in accordance with the spirit of the time. However a further difficulty arose that of defining the nature and conditions of equivalence and in 1980s the term was finally discarded from translation studies. The real problem Hornby says is that though the area of translation studies has broadened extensively, Catford's definition of the term translation has in English not yet been replaced by a better one. Even in Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies one cannot find a precise and authoritative modern definition of the term translation. The result is that the scholars use the term loosely and in different ways, frequently in their own personal understanding of it or according to a particular dogma.

Doris Bachmann-Medick says that just to expand the concept of translation will not mean that a translational turn has resulted. For a turn to be recognized it has to move through three stages—expansion of the object or thematic field; metaphorization; methodological refinement, provoking a conceptual leap and transdisciplinary application. He says:

Thus only when the conceptual leap has been made and "translation" is no longer restricted to a particular object of investigation, but moves right across the disciplines as a new means of knowledge and a methodologically reflected analytical category, can we really speak of a "translational turn". (4)

We can say that a translation turn has occurred only when translation becomes the part of native sensibilities. When there is assimilation of translation without any fear and anxiety. When translation attains empowerment, that is when we are reading a translated text without thinking that it is not our own. When we break the binary between the organic and the translated then only we can say that a real translated turn has occurred.

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