Module 5: Cultural Turn in Translation Studies

Lecture 1 – Translation and Culture

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1.1 Introduction:

The problematic issues traditionally troubling the translator of a literary text were limited to finding equivalents for lexis, syntax and certain concepts. Translation was seen a sub-system of linguistics and its potential for being a part of cultural semiotic system was not recognized. Lawrence Venuti rightly points out that linguistic approaches to translation, “offer truncated view of the empirical data they collect...and remain reluctant to take into account the social values that enter into translating as well as the study of it.” (1998) The cultural turn in translation studies conceived of translation as a tool to uncover asymmetrical power relations between the two cultures it negotiated, an agent that plays a significant role in charting out the cultural histories of nations and people. The critical role of ideology, poetics and Universe of Discourse (Lefevere, 2000) in the way translations are commissioned, executed and published came under critical scanner and it threw up interesting insights as to the modes and terms of cultural collisions, transactions and dialogue. Andre Lefevere, one of the major translation scholars who linked translation with cultural studies, remarks, “Seen in this way translation can be studied as one of the strategies cultures develop to deal with what lies outside their boundaries and to maintain their own character while doing so – the kind of strategy that ultimately belongs to the realm of change and survival, not in dictionaries and grammars”. (2000)

1.2 Corpus Approach to Literature

In his scholarly book, Essays in Comparative Literature: A Systems Approach (1998), Andre Lefevere elaborates upon the concept of the corpus approach to literature which, according to him, has Platonic-romantic underpinnings. This narrow approach to literature imparts a writer the status of quasi-divine ‘creator’ with peerless ‘artistic genius’, ‘creativity’ and ‘originality’. As Theo Hermans says, “If the literary artist is viewed as a uniquely gifted creative genius endowed with profound insight and a mastery of his native language, the work he produces will naturally come to be regarded as exalted, untouchable, inimitable, hallowed.” (1985) This understanding of literature relegates translation to a deprecating, ‘second-hand’, ‘second-rate’ level as being a mere botched-up copy of the original work of art and translator as a drudge, a proletariat, only a blotting paper. This traditional essentialist approach falls back on the Western Platonic-Christian metaphysics that is deeply rooted in the original versus copy dichotomy.

Lefevere opines that all the corpus-approach based explications are normative, that is, furnishing the translator with do and don't norms which are “not too far away from the poetics of a specific literary period” (p.174), though they do not crystallize their norms explicitly and comprehensibly. Again these normative explications strive hard to describe the
translation process but fail to shed light into “that blackest of black boxes” (Hermans, 1985) to explain the actual cerebral process of decoding and encoding linguistic signs. They come up with a certain model for the translation process, which turns out to be helpful in training amateur translators or in programming computer translation, but which happens to be too simplistic to aid literary translation.

1.3 Non-Essentialist Approach to Literature

As we saw in the earlier module, laudable attempts have been made by scholars like Andre Lefevere, Gideon Toury, Theo Hermans and Itamar Evan-Zohar around mid-1970s to establish a new paradigm for the study of literary translation based on the view of literature as “a complex and dynamic system; a conviction that there should be a continual interplay between theoretical models and practical case studies; an approach to literary translation which is descriptive, target-oriented, functional and systematic; and an interest in the norms and constraints that govern the production and reception of translations...and in the place and role of translations both within a given literature and in the interaction between literatures.” (Hermans, 1985) In complete contrast to corpus approach stands the non-essentialist approach, which disclaims the idea of literature as an independent and self-sufficient body and views it as operative in broader social and cultural framework, as influencing and being influenced by multifarious social, political, economic “signifying practices” that manoeuvre in the same socio-cultural framework. The semiotician Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the notion of ‘intertextuality’ looks upon any signifying system as already consisting of other modes of cultural signification. (1988) Thus, a text would implicate not only other verbal texts but also other modes of signification like myths, fashion, indigenous medicinal system, food, metaphysical structure, other literary texts, literary genres and devices and other symbolic structures. The focus in this perspective converges pointedly on to examination of the play of intersubjective factors active in any culture. It examines complex interconnections between poetics, politics, metaphysics and history. Literature, to the scholars subscribing to this non-essentialist perspective, is a sub-system of the cultural semiotic system and since it is “correlated with other cultural systems and embedded in the ideological and socio-economic structures of society, its dynamism is far from mechanistic”. (Hermans, 1985) In his essay “A Rationale for Descriptive Translation Studies” (1985), Toury makes a call for the explication of the ideological and poetological constraints under which translations are produced; “and the strategy devised by the translator to deal with those constraints should be described: does he or she make a translation in a more descriptive or in a more refractive way? What are the intentions with which he or she introduces foreign elements into the native system?” when one tries to find answers to such questions, equivalence, fidelity, freedom and the like come to be seen as just functions of a strategy adopted under certain constraints, rather than absolute requirements, or norms that should or should not be imposed or respected.

1.4 Andre Lefevere’s Concept of Refractions

In an attempt to substantiate the relation of power and authority between the source culture and target culture, Andre Lefevere propounds his most influential theory of refractions and patronage. He makes a plea for marking a departure from a quest for the meaning of a given work to “an analysis of the conditions under which meaning is or, in practice, meanings are produced, an analysis of the very controls and regulations that have been applied, and continue to be applied to interpretation and to translation.” (1984) Meaning, according to Lefevere, is not inherent in a given work but an outcome of the interaction of a series of factors and constraints which operate in order to adapt a work of art to a specific ideology or to a certain poetics or to both. ‘Refraction’ is the blanket term used by him to cover literary activities like criticism, translation, anthologization, the writing of literary history and the editing of texts-in fact, all those aspects of literary studies, which establish and validate the value-structures of canons. As he remarks, “Refractions are made to influence the way in which readers read a text as such they are powerful instruments in ensuring the ‘right’ reading of works of literature and in perpetuating ‘right readings’” (p.89)
Lefevere refers to literature as "one of the systems which constitute the system of discourses (which also contain disciplines like physics or law) usually referred to as a civilization, or a society." and cleverly adds that the 'control factor' in the literary system checks it from falling too far out of step with other systems which collectively form society. This control factor functions from outside as well as from inside of this system. The factor within the system is that of dominant poetics, "which can be said to consist of two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, symbols; the other a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the society at large." (p.23).

The second regulatory mechanism is 'patronage', which is a kind of force that can encourage and propagate but can also discourage, edit and ruin the literary works. Patrons can be represented by groups or persons, such as a religious grouping or a political party, a royal court, publishers, whether they have a virtual monopoly on the book trade or not and, last but not least, the media. It is formed by individuals like Maecenas or an emperor or a sultan or institutions such as Roman Catholic Church, the communist party, the BBC etc. "Patronage consists of at least three components: an ideological one, which tends to establish a balance between what is ideologically acceptable inside the literary system and what is ideologically acceptable in the world at large, an economic one, which assures the livelihood of the writers and refractors, and a status component which provides writers and refractors with a certain position in society." (1984, p.16)

The control mechanism within the literary system is represented by critics, reviewers, teachers of literature, translators and other rewriters who will adapt works of literature to the poetics and the ideology of their time. All 'refracted' texts according to Lefevere are mainly responsible for the canonized status of the corpus. "Ideological and poetological motivations are always present in the production, or the non-production of translations of literary works...Translation and other refractions, then, play a vital part in the evolution of literatures, not only by introducing new texts, authors and devices, but also by introducing them in a certain way, as part of a wider design to try to influence that evolution."(98-99) Translation becomes one of the parts of the 'refraction' "... the rather long term strategy, of which translation is only a part, and which has as its aim the manipulation of foreign work in the service of certain aims that are felt worthy of pursuit in the native culture..."(1985, p.225). In addition to their being used to shore up and reinforce the prevailing conventions, translations can sometimes be used as polemical weapons to challenge the dominant poetics when the alternative poetics doesn't have a representative work of its own.

References:

Assignments:

1. What is the nature of relationship between translation and culture? What does ‘cultural turn’ in this context signify?

2. Elaborate upon Lefevere’s concept of refraction. Locate literary translation in this complex process of refraction.