

Role of Translation in the 21st Century

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Abstract

In the 21st century the role of translation has become even more significant. It is one of the most effective ways of building cross-cultural bridges. A pooling and sharing of knowledge is indeed possible only when special efforts are made to cross language boundaries. The best tool employed for this purpose is translation which seeks special attention in our multilingual context. Increasing translation practices is bound to create sensitivity to the massive cultural reservoir lying in the other's language, thus leading to the inculcation of respect for the other in addition to evoking curiosity to know the language that contains such literature. Translation is a faculty that brings us closer to alien cultures and societies not only through their literatures but also their films and other electronic media through subtitling and dubbing. In a country such as India where there are multiple languages, each is a rich storehouse of knowledge and literary traditions.

Translation calls for a lot of creativity because to translate inevitably means the reconstruction of a text. With adequate sensitivity and knowledge of the cultures of both the languages, the translator becomes a mediator who creates the scope and means to transfer the meaning and experience of the 'original' text into another language. Translation is not merely a technical skill, but also an art form, not subservient to the original. The translator thus has to be equipped with adequate preparation and creativity along with linguistic skills to be able to transcreate a text. The process of translation then brings one into a very intimate relationship with at least two languages. Thus, cultural dialoging through translation will facilitate nation building and preservation of cultural diversity.

Key Words: Translation, literature, electronic media, reconstruction, text, languages

Current global issues urge us to image and imagine different aspects related to translation in newer dimensions. There is no doubt that the demand for English has been growing. At the same time it has also been felt that there is a need to promote greater dialogue between English and native languages which can happen through translation. The standardization of certain languages at the cost of others can be traced to colonial times. Over the years nations strove to become monolingual and regional or native languages were marginalized and neglected. The twenty-first century however has ushered in some significant changes. The following paper addresses some of these with respect to translation.

The Indian context

India, as one of the oldest knowledge bases, has a cherished tradition of translation. Here, multiplicities of languages, diverse cultures and religions have co-existed, each impacting the other and evolving a rich composite whole. Also, there is an implicit recognition of our linguistic plurality through the various linguistically identified regions. Thanks to the vibrant linguistic plurality around us, most of us are at least bi-lingual. In such a circumstance we are actually natural translators, shifting easily from one language to another. We may think in one language, converse in another and write in yet another language. If we make concerted efforts to understand the different cultures/language groups, there may be great hope for their survival through the respect accorded to each for its rich literary and cultural traditions evolved over centuries.

In the 21st century the role of translation has become even more significant. It is one of the most effective ways of building cross-cultural bridges, i.e. making the rich literatures of one language accessible to the other. More and more translations are bound to create sensitivity to the massive cultural reservoir lying in the other's language, thus leading to the inculcation of respect for the other in addition to evoking curiosity to know the language that contains such literature. Translation is a faculty that brings us closer to alien

cultures and societies not only through their literatures but also their films and other electronic media through subtitling and dubbing.

With the explosion of knowledge and ever-expanding information technology in contemporary times, the big question that looms over us is how to access diverse knowledge and how to manage human sensitivities in varied cultural contexts. A pooling and sharing of knowledge is indeed possible only when special efforts are made to cross language boundaries. The best tool employed for this purpose is translation which seeks special attention in our multilingual context.

India's linguistic potential

Indeed, in a country such as India where there are multiple languages, each a rich storehouse of knowledge and literary traditions. In many Indian languages, we have a great legacy of translations from various classical languages such as Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit on the one hand and on the other, from foreign modern languages such as Russian, German, French etc. Also translations have been happening amongst Indian languages themselves, thus making significant writers, for example from Tamil, Bangla or Malayalam to mention a few, available to readers of say, Hindi or Kannada. Thanks to translations we have been able to access and read such great writers as Rabindranath Tagore, Prem Chand and Subramania Bharati from different Indian languages in our own languages. Sometimes the translations have happened through link languages such as English and Hindi.

As the linguists tell us, thanks to extensive translation activity in some languages, linguistic changes result from the influence of one language on the other. For instance, the influence of English on the Dravidian languages has been so pronounced that even the structure of these languages has changed a little due to constant translations happening from the English language. Also, if some terms are so culture specific that translation is not possible,

the scope of the target language expands through the introduction of new words transferred from the source language. Or new words and phrases may get created within the target language to translate such terms.

Translation as a Technical Expertise

Translation essentially implies transference of material from one language to another. Since each language carries within itself its own culture and temper, the process of translation demands that the translator be adequately equipped with

- (i) the knowledge of what is called the source language as well as the target language and
- (ii) knowledge of the culture of each of the languages to be able to comprehend the source language and then find appropriate equivalent words/phrases in the target languages.

A literal translation, word for word, can be “faithful” but not beautiful; in fact, at times a literal translation may even distort the meaning. There are two approaches to translation - the product approach and the process approach. Earlier translations were done keeping the product i.e. finished translation in mind. The focus was how far the textual material in source language has been replaced by the target language equivalents whereas the process approach urges the translators to understand the nuances, the culture the language and the grammar of the source language and then produce their work i.e. the translated text.

The translator has to understand the context and the culture within which certain words are used and then work out a way to translate them in a suitable manner. This may require not just lexical meanings from dictionaries but also research into the cultures of the source and target languages. Metaphors, proverbs, symbols, idioms

on the one hand and on the other abuses, kinship terms etc are all markers of culture. They pose a big challenge to the translator since their meaning evolves from specific cultures. Humour and even colours can be culture specific. What is celebratory in one culture can be mournful in another. The translator's job is to know such cultural difference and render the translation accordingly.

One thing common amongst different kinds of translation is its main function, that is, to build bridges and create a dialogue between different languages, different cultures. In Arabic, the word for translation is *tarjuman* leading to the process of mediation between languages. Translation then, expands the knowledge sphere for humanity and makes room for diversity of cultures through understanding, caring and accommodation of diversity of cultures.

Translation as part of the curriculum

Multilingualism is increasingly becoming a significant phenomenon all over the world. Knowing more than one language increases the scope for wider communication. At the same time, the growing interest in the maintenance and revival of many languages among their speakers provides an additional impetus for the development of multilingualism.

This suggests a rethinking of the purpose, function, and methodology of teaching languages in developing world contexts, building on the ways that local communities use multilingualism to address power relationships inherent in local-global configuration. In this context, language-educators have a crucial and demanding role.

In India the study of two or more languages is essential. No person can confine herself or himself to a single language even for a day. In schools, however, we study languages as watertight compartments. While conversing we may begin the sentence in one language and end it in another but in the classroom we emphasise

exclusivity and purity. Education needs to be rooted in the physical and cultural soil of the child.

We must bridge the gap between experienced reality and pedagogical practice by recognizing that although it is important to know the individual features of every language, it is also essential in our multilingual context to look at them comparatively. This can be achieved by introducing students to translation as a creative activity. Translation activity also helps in adding new literature (content, forms, trends) and new linguistic expressions and styles/registral varieties to the stock of the language (and its literature).

Societal learning is an asset and the formal curriculum is greatly enriched by integrating with that. There is a celebration of plurality and an understanding that within a broad framework plural approaches would lead to enhanced creativity.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 states that ‘India is a multicultural society made up of numerous regional and local cultures. People’s religious beliefs, ways of life and their understanding of social relationships are quite distinct from one another. All the groups have equal rights to co-exist and flourish, and the education system needs to respond to the cultural pluralism inherent in our society. To strengthen our cultural heritage and national identity, the curriculum should enable the younger generation to reinterpret and re-evaluate the past with reference to new priorities and emerging outlooks of a changing societal context. Understanding human evolution should make it clear that the existence of distinctness in our country, which allowed it to flourish. The cultural diversity of this land should continue to be treasured as a special attribute. This should be considered a result of mere tolerance. Creation of a citizenry conscious of their rights and duties, and commitment to the principles embodied in our Constitution is a prerequisite in this context.’ (NCF 2005)

Language development is defined as a process of cultural change – from less elaborate to more elaborate, horizontally as well as vertically – and standardization. The term ‘culture’ is understood here in the wider sense, relating to all the vital aspects of human behaviour, manifested in linguistically and otherwise. A change in the culture of a society is a movement toward elaboration i.e. sophistication and expansion. Speaking linguistically, it means enabling society to talk more and more, and talk sensibly, coherently and effectively. With a call for greater participation in development processes, educators are expected to cater to students from diverse cultures.

Current pedagogical debates in translation studies make translation less teacher centric which can be achieved by conducting workshops, involving professional translators and using real life situations. We should adopt a social constructivist approach – when faced with translation we can rely on our prior experiences. We must aim to move from ‘translation competence’ to ‘translator competence’ (Donal C Kiraly, 2003). Creativity and critical thinking abilities can facilitate progress of learners from autonomy to authenticity to expertise.

According to Konigs (1986), “only an interdisciplinary approach allows an adequate description of many communicative factors involved in real translation; only an interdisciplinary approach – a synthesis of the linguistic, social and cognitive disciplines- will provide new principles to guide the teaching of translation skills.” (Kiraly, 1995).

The National Knowledge Commission also recognizes the importance of translation of pedagogic materials at all levels including primary onwards to tertiary education.

‘India has been at the forefront of translation for many centuries. With many languages and cultures, the country also provides a rich testing ground for all major theoretical initiatives of both literary and machine translation.’ (NKC, 2006)

Creative Endeavours and translation

To translate inevitably means a reconstruction of a text. Translation therefore calls for a lot of creativity to first decode an existent text for its comprehension and internalization, and then recode it into a new text in another language. The new text is a re-creation that has to stand in total autonomy, free of the “original” text and complete in itself. Translation, it is said, is really a rebirth.

The linguistic transformation implies to a large extent a cultural transformation too. Just as a lot can be lost in translation and a lot can also be gained in translation. Each language bears within itself its own cultural baggage. That is why when the source text is translated into another language, it is necessary that the culture of the target language be negotiated.

With adequate sensitivity and knowledge of the cultures of both the languages, the translator becomes a mediator who creates scope and means to transfer the meaning and experience of the “original” text into another language. Translation is a cross-cultural transmission skill, a creative endeavour to build another linguistic structure to accommodate and contain what is otherwise quite foreign to it. Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture. As Homi Bhabha has stated: ‘Where once we could believe in the comforts and continuities of Tradition, today we must face the responsibilities of cultural Translation’

Translation sets an example for inter cultural relations in this century which is characterized by economic, social and political movements. While translating either one domesticise or foreignise the text. In the words of Stephnos, “The focus has been on the ways in which ‘traditional’ conceptions of translation, construed as a one-way process wherein a ‘foreign’ source language is domesticated by the target language, has given way to a realization of translation as a dynamic and ongoing reciprocal process.”

Translation is not merely a technical skill, but also an art form, not subservient to the original. The translator thus has to be equipped with adequate preparation and creativity along with linguistic skills to be able to transcreate a text. The process of translation then brings one into a very intimate relationship with at least two languages. The role of translation for language learning is immense. And, language conservation and then linguistic proficiency.

Teaching translation demands that both teachers and students develop:

- Sound Knowledge of the Source Language
- Proficiency in the Target Language
- Adequate Knowledge of the Subject
- Sensitivity to Language Style
- Tools of Translation
- Research

In this context translation should not be limited to a word by word, mechanical activity but it is important that the translator has to understand the context and culture within which certain words are used. In the words of Anthony Burgess (1984):

‘Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.’

In knowing and understanding the world around us translation plays a major role. Since its inception, translation has played the indispensable role of transferring messages across languages and cultural barriers. By doing so it continuously weakens the fences between languages, brings out their similarities and finds points of convergence amongst differences.

We would not have been able to read the works of great writers and thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Darwin, Einstein, Varahmir, Kalidasa, Anton Chekov, Guy de Maupassant, Premchand, Rabindranath Tagore, Subramania Bharti, Qurratulain Hider, Saadat Hassan Manto etc if their works had not been translated. The aesthetic sensibility or world literature can be enjoyed through translations. For example, Rabindranath Tagore's *Geetanjali* for which he won the Nobel Prize, was originally written in Bangla. His work received worldwide recognition because it was translated into English and most languages of the world.

Tools to aid translation

We must remember that while tools do not maketh the man, a worker without his tools does very little work. A translator would therefore need access to certain materials like:

- Good monolingual/bilingual dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Thesaurus in both languages (SL & TL)
- Grammar books in both languages (SL & TL)
- Guides to usage

ICT support can also be relied upon in terms of:

- Document production
- Information search and retrieval – locating background, reference material, locating clients, understanding their culture and background
- On-line encyclopedias, dictionaries etc
- Liaising with fellow translators
- Work production

However, one has to use all these tools with intelligence and caution. Despite being in the digital age, one cannot depend entirely on computers. A human interface is essential for good translations. Translation is not merely a technical skill, it is an art form, not subservient to the original. The translator thus has to be equipped with adequate preparation and creativity along with linguistic skills to be able to transcreate a text. Translation both as metaphor and practice plays a central role.

Conclusion

In the fields of education, science and technology, mass communication, commerce tourism etc. the need for translation has increased greatly. And translation allows us to tap the rich knowledge base that exists in different languages and cultures of the world. India's multilingualism and multicultural ethos can be celebrated in the real sense of the word by understanding and appreciating its diverse literatures and this is being done through translation. Thus cultural dialoging through translation will facilitate nation building and preservation of cultural diversity.

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