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# Writing and Translation: Perspectives from Latin America

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## Abstract

*Recent translation theories and the discussion around them have benefited from postcolonial perspectives. Latin American perspectives on translation have now been circulating in such discussions. This paper will attempt to present the views offered on translation by Latin American writers such as **Jorge Luis Borges** and **Octavio Paz** as well as the perspectives coming from Brazil on **antropofagia**. Borges views all literature as a form of translation while Octavio Paz argues that to learn to talk is to learn to translate. Both writers make an extraordinary effort to comment on translation which seems to form an important part of their views on writing itself. The **antropofagia** school views translation as devouring of an original to produce a new text. All these perspectives call for detailed attention as, in the Indian writings on translation, these perspectives have either remained marginalized or have been scattered as sporadic references. Latin American views on translation need to be looked at closely to see if one can talk of a Third World paradigm as regards translation theory.*

When Hernan Cortes, the Spanish conquistador, entered Mexico, his dialogue with native Indians was routed through Malinche. Malinche was a native Aztec Indian woman who was sold off as a slave to Cortes and later became his mistress and interpreter who facilitated communication between the Spanish masters and the subjugated native community. There is a hierarchy inherent in this linguistic exchange which is haunting the discourse on identity and literary works in Latin America till date. The Adamic function that the conquistador performed in Latin

America annihilated the possibility of a two-way translation. During the colonial period in Latin America, translation was an act of subjugation. The context of translation studies has to be seen within this frame work.

In this paper I make an attempt to look at some theoretical aspects on how the act of translation is perceived by some Latin American Writers. I am going to focus on basically two writers: Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina 1899-1986) and Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1914-1998) and have a brief look at the perspectives from Brazil. Both, Borges and Paz write as well as translate and have, in various contexts, discussed translation.

Translation acquires significance especially with reference to Latin America as both colonization and de-colonization have had significant social, political, cultural and economic consequences. Some of these have reshaped the definition of the term 'Translation', along with different literary and linguistic movements. As we know, the debate on what exactly translation is, is still on. Since the 1990s, there has been a cultural turn in translation studies whereby neither the word nor the text but the culture becomes the 'operational' unit of translation (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 8). (This is impugned in Giridhar's paper in this issue though.) As Kothari notes, while Sturrock (1990) and Talal Asad (1986) see ethnography as an act of translation, Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) and Eric Cheyfitz (1991) employ it as a metaphor of the Empire. Their postcolonial writings focus on understanding in equalities and slippages in colonial relationships through translation (Kothari 2006). These post-colonial definitions of translation, arising basically from Asia and Europe should be seen alongside how the act of translation is perceived in another part of the world, i.e. Latin America. The writers that I am going to discuss prefigure this cultural turn in their views on translation.

Daniel Balderston (2002), in the introduction to his recent book *Voice-Overs*, states that translation has become both a mechanism and a metaphor for contemporary translational cultures

in Americas. Except for Brazil, the entire south and central Americas have Spanish as the official language and translation continues to be one of the main tools and defining images of Latin American cultures in its relation to world cultures.

### **Translation and the colonial enterprise**

Translation went hand in hand along with conquest in Latin America. Colonialism imposed Spanish to transcribe native languages.<sup>1</sup> Talking about the translation practices historically one could say it is “one and multiple,” a history which is a reflection of one cultural unity based on essential paradoxical relation between hispanism and indigenism. The figure of Malinilli Tenepal, the Aztec Indian referred to above by her better known name of Malinche, is a symbol of ‘mestizaje’ (hybridity) of the cultures in Latin America, being one of the first American interpreters. When Columbus first landed on the American lands he came across thousands of languages among them were Azteca, Maya-quiche, Nauhatl, Chibcha, the Tupi-guarani, Aymara Quechua and Araucana. (Rosenblat 1984: 72-74). Gradually Spanish was imposed in whole of the continent.<sup>2</sup>

The role of lettered class, regardless of race, incorporated translation as practice and as a method of analysis. The work that Calvo considers as the “major efforts of translation of the Catholic church in America in the colonial period” are the catecismo of the Christian doctrine, a trilingual doctrine in Spanish, Quechua and Aymara published by Autorio Ricardo in 1584 (Calvo 2002:113).

The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Guaman Poma de Ayala present mestizo and indigenous examples of cultural ‘interpreters’ of the colonial experience. Inca Garcilaso de la Vega was a famous Peruvian poet. He was born of Spanish aristocratic and Inca royal roots while Guaman Poma de Ayala was an indigenous Peruvian who became proficient in Spanish language at a very young age and served as a Quecua translator. The first law that came into force to

teach Spanish to the Indian children dates back to 1550 (Solano 1991: 17) and subsequently the American languages were declared illegal by Carlos III (Solano 1991: 257).

It is also interesting to note that like the already quoted case of Malinche, the conquerors married the indigenous women who were their interpreters. As stated by Francisco de Solano (1975), the Indian or the Spanish interpreters represent the first step of the approximation of two worlds, or one of the 'axes of acculturation'. Many books in French, Italian English were read in the new world with an avidity which was thought an obstacle for Christianization and therefore it resulted with the extinction of the book (the burning of the Maya codes perpetrated by Diego de Landa in 1529) which Delisle and Woodsworth call it a serious act of 'anti-translation' of the new world. The end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the XIX century acquire intellectual prominence in the whole of Latin America.

With the consolidation of the Republic, the activity of translation also got consolidated from the second half of the XIX century. Translation has an important role in the definitive implantation of Latin American nations and defined their development. It was also a central character in this continent which had several indigenous languages and gained lot of importance in the period after independence. Many French and English works were translated. Many Latin American writers took up translation, prominent among them is the famous Venezuelan Andres Bello. Cuba counts on the famous writer, philosopher and translator Jose Marti (1853-1895) who translated Antiguades Griegas, of J.H Mahaffy. He is also known as a critic of the translations.

To conclude one can say that the history of translation in Latin America is anchored in the region's colonial past and its Post-Independence process of developing and redefining cultural identities. The contests over languages and cultural identity that still

rage in contemporary writing derive from these early nation building struggles.

## **Two translators: Borges and Paz**

### ***Jorge Luis Borges***

Jorge Luis Borges the Argentinian poet/writer is more widely recognized for his fiction than for his views on translation. Borges introduces himself as the translator of Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Henri Michaux. Borges' translations and his reflections on translations are invariably at the core of his creative process. Borges views all literature as a form of translation.

His observations on translations came in as early as 1930s. There is a significant shift in his views on literature since the 1930s which also reflect in his views on translation. He abandoned two positions he had considered seriously and in some cases defended vehemently. The first is the idea that literature is fundamentally autobiographical and that its ultimate significance is lost on those who ignore the circumstances of individual authors. The second which he sometimes related to the first, is the view that literature is the ex-pression of nationality or a national character. However, he never abandoned altogether the view that personal circumstances can be a relevant factor in the discussion of a literary work, but since the 1930s the individuality of the writer played an ever diminishing role in the observations on literature, especially when compared to the impersonal and collective efforts of the literary experience.

The fidelity debate that took place in translation has a different angle with respect to Borges' views. In normal practice it was argued that the translation is not faithful to the original but Borges affirmed, in earnest, that an original can be unfaithful to a translation. Borges would often protest, with various degrees of irony against the assumption-ingrained in the Italian adage *traduttore traditore*- that the translator is a traitor to the original (Kristal 2002:1). Translation according to him enriches or surpasses

the original. A good translator, according to him, might choose to treat the original as a good writer treats the draft of a work in progress.

Talking about translatability and untranslatability, he discusses two main aspects – “the language of ideas and the language of the emotions”, the former he considers as translatable and the latter as un-translatable (ibid.: 4). A good poem therefore according to him is untranslatable as it involves not only transfer of meaning but also the intonation and the rhythm of that language.

Borges like Steiner believes that a translator can bring out the hidden subtleties of the original text. He encouraged the translators of his poems to take liberties. He follows Quine in claiming that any given text can have an indefinite number of valid and even contradictory translations.

Borges closely followed the Mathew Arnold and Francis E. Newmann debate and formulates his definition on translation. He defines translation as a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphasis which involves choice, chance and experimentation (Kristal 2002:18).

These views on translation were expressed by him in two of his major essays *Homeric Versions* and *Thousand and one nights*. In his essay on the *Arabian Nights*, Borges also contends that a translator has an option to interpolate passages into a text that are not in the original. He coins the term *Buenas apocrifidades* which Esther Allen improves with the phrase ‘*fine apocrypha*’ to refer to the additions with which a translator can supplement the original (ibid.:26). He maintained that some interpolations in a translation may leave the content of a work untouched because they are implicit yet unstated in the original.

Having seen Borges’ observations on translation we can say that his views come basically more from his own experiences as a translator than from a very critical point of view.

For Borges a translation is not inherently inferior to its original. He further feels that a translation enhances the work of the original. Most of his writings can be seen as responses to the works he already translated. For him a translation is as creative a process as writing. In short, Borges' translations offer insights into his creative process, and into workings of his imagination. We could sum up with a quotation "Perhaps the translator's craft is more subtle, more civilized than the writer: the translator obviously comes after the writer. Translation is a more advanced stage." (see Levine 1991:1)

### ***Octavio Paz***

Octavio Paz, the Mexican writer, poet and Nobel Laureate too has translated many literary works and has discussed translation. For him to learn to talk is to learn to translate. He compares translation to that of child language acquisition. He doesn't differentiate much between the two processes. For him a translator is doing the same as the child when he asks his mother the meaning of a word, what he really asking is to translate to his language the unknown term. The same according to him happens between two languages. In his essay on *Traducción literature y literalidad*, he says, it is thanks to translation that we are aware of how our neighbours think and talk differently. The world is seen as a collection of heterogenities on one hand and on the other as a superposition of texts, each one slightly different from the earlier: translations of translations of translations (Paz 1980:13). The diversities existing in the world he feels encourage the translator to translate more and more. His opinions on translations have influences of history, philosophy and linguistics. The text is the central theme in his discussions on translation. No text for him is entirely original, because the language itself, in its essence is already a translation, firstly from the non verbal world and later each sign and each sentence is the translation of another sign and another sentence. He further adds that each text is unique and

simultaneously is the translation of other text. Thus Paz sees the text as the subject of translation.

He explains further in an interview with Edwin Honig that the text as a text is lost in translation. But the text as a poem is not lost. What he says is that it is changed, transformed... perhaps. Text produces the poem: a set of sensations and meanings. The texts are signs – written or oral, they are material things, you can see them or hear them and they produce meanings. While discussing literal translation which in Spanish is significantly *Servil*, he doesn't view it impossible and adds that it is not a translation but a device which helps us to read the text in original. The translation is just a transformation of the original. These literary transformations are operations that come under the Jakobsonian modes of ex-pression: Metonymy and Metaphor. (Paz 1980:14).

He continues his argument saying that in prose the function of signs is mainly to produce meanings: in poetry the material properties of the signs, especially the sounds are also essential. Both Borges and Paz who are poets as well, express their anguish about the translation of poetry. "In poetry you cannot separate the sign from the meaning. Poetry is the marriage of the sensual or the physical half of language with its ideal or mental half."

Translation, he defines, is an art of analogy, an art of finding correspondences, an art of shadows and echoes. In the same interview with Honig, Paz talks about three kinds of translation. One is literal translation, which is conceivable and useful in learning a language. Then you have literary translation, where the original is changed in order to be more 'faithful' and less 'literal'. And then you have another kind, imitation, which is neither literal nor faithful. In the discussion with Honig he maintains that translation is dynamic. He feels that a translator while repeating what is in the original should also invent something new. Translation is thus only one degree of balance between repetition and invention, tradition and creation.



Talking about the practice of translation he says in the first place one must love the text, then one must know his own language and also have a good knowledge of the text he is translating. Apart from other essential things for translation one should also have inspiration which should come from within.

Translation and creations are operations that are like twins. His views on translations were formulated while translating works of the famous poets of the occident. To conclude, Paz honors the process of translation as a different but still 'original' creative activity.

### **Translation Today in Latin America**

Translation is viewed radically different in the Brazilian school of thought. The emergence of *Manifesto Antropofago* in the 1920 by Oswald de Andrade where the activity of translation is cannibalistic, has given a new dimension to the theories on translation.

Antropofagia has developed into a very specific national experimentalism, a poetics of translation, an ideological operation as well as a critical discourse theorizing the relation between Brazil and external influences increasingly moving away from an essentialist confrontation toward a bilateral appropriation of sources and the contamination of colonial/ hegemonic univocality.

Antropofagia discusses translation in terms of a dialogue and defines it both as donor and receiver of forms. Haroldo de Campos, the best known theorist of translation discourses on antropofagia, in his essay *Mephistofaustian Transluciferation* calls "the translator of poetry" a choreographer of the internal dance of language and opposes the straight ahead goal of a word-to-word competition, the pavlovian bell of the conditioned feed back to what he advocates: to hear the beating of the wild heart of the art of translation, regarded as a form, poetic translation, transcreation, 'hypertranslation' (Vieira 1999:96-98).

In the opening plenary lecture in a conference organized by the Universities of Oxford and Yale in honor of Haroldo de Campos on his seventieth birthday, Brazilian literature as well as other Latin-American literatures, he argues, was born under the sign of the Baroque, as such a non-origin, non-infancy. The Brazilian/Latin American literary nationalism, he says, should be seen not as formation but as transformation, hybridism and creative translation.

### **Conclusion**

Both Borges and Paz's comments on translation have arisen from their actual practice of translation as a craft. Translation is, for them, a creative activity as worthy as an original. It is also enriching in the sense of a creative process conditioned by a hybridized culture which has oral indigenous tradition and the colonial written influence, the outcome of which leads to transcreation. We can thus see that their views on translation prefigure the 'cultural turn' in translation which was debated in the 90s.

Borges views all literature as a form of translation while Octavio Paz argues that to learn to talk is to learn to translate. Both writers make an extraordinary effort to comment on translation which seems to form an important part of their views on writing itself. The Antropophagia School views translation as devouring of an original to produce a new text. All these perspectives call for close attention in order to see if one can talk of a Third World paradigm about translation theory as they bear a close similarity to post colonial views on translation arising mainly from India.

### **NOTES**

1. Vicente L. Rafael states that the Spanish words *conquista* (conquest), *conversion* (conversion) and *traduccion* (translation) are semantically related. *Traducir* (to translate) is synonymous with *conversion* (to convert) just as it can also refer to *mudar* (to change) and *trocar* (to exchange).

2. The intersection of languages is a hallmark of postcolonial literature, according to William Ashcroft, and Latin American writing clearly demonstrates this distinguishing feature. Whether or not one considers Latin America to have been 'colonial' or 'postcolonial' is a big question as its literature does not exhibit many of the characteristics of 'postcolonial' writings that theorists have studied in writing from India and Africa (Bhaba, Triffin et al).

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