

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

An Overview of History of Translation in the Western World

Mihir Dave

Assistant Professor,
Department of Communication Skills,
Marwadi Education Foundation's Group of Institutions
Rajkot, Gujarat, India

Dr Paresh Joshi

Professor
Department of English
Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat
Gujarat, India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2018.3.5.02

Abstract

The act of translation is as old as the human language. In the west, the earliest reference to the transitional activities goes back to as early as the third millennium BC. The act of translation has been put under various domains so far that includes but not limited to "art," "craft," or "science". It is interesting to note that never before in the history, the act of translation has been given its due credit and credential as it has been attributed in the last and the first decades of 20th and 21st century respectively. The study of translation has been recognized as an accepted field of research. The present paper aims at drawing an outline of Western history of translation briefly. The purpose of the paper is also do provide a tersely glance at the history of translation in the west that can be a ready reference for the student and researcher of the translation studies. It has to be noted here that the list of the periods and works of translation are collected from various archives and reference books related to translation studies, however, the author does not claim that the list is exhaustive.

Keywords- Translation theory; Literary translation; Historiography of translation

Introduction

The act of translation is as old as the human language. In the west, the earliest reference to the transitional activities goes back to as early as the third millennium BC. The act of translation has been put under various domains so far that include but not limited to "art," "craft," or "science". In the west, the earliest reference to the transitional activities goes back to as early as the third millennium BC: "The Babylon of Hammurabi's day (2100 B.C.) was a polyglot city, and much of the official business of the empire was made possible by corps of scribes who translated edicts into various languages" (Nida,11). The role of a

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

translator, however, has been recognised under various contradictory categories from that of a 'traitor' or even 'predator' or 'cannibal' to that of a 'transformer', 'bridge' or 'deliverer'.

It is interesting to note that never before in the history, the act of translation has been given its due credit and credential as it has been attributed in the last and the first decades of 20th and 21st century respectively. The study of translation has been recognized as an accepted field of research and "books, journals and doctoral dissertations appear faster than one can read them all, and at the heart of most of the exciting new research are broad questions about ideology, ethics and culture" (Kuhiwczak and Littau 14). The present paper aims at drawing an outline of Western history of translation briefly. The purpose of the paper is also to provide a tersely glance at the history of translation in the west that can be a ready reference for the student and researcher of the translation studies. It has to be noted here that the list of the periods and works of translation are collected from various archives and reference books of translation studies, however, the author does not claim that the list is exhaustive.

The Roman Translations

In the Western world, the Romans are considered to be the earliest to engage in the process of translation. Most of the Greek works from philosophical to scientific and from historical to spiritual ones almost all the Greek socio-cultural and socio-political tradition were translated to such an extent that its now beyond recognition as to which is Greek and which is Roman. Later on, the translations of the Bible that were attempted too has its root in the translation practices in Greco-Roman translation theory. It is therefore that one finds the earliest translators of well-known Greek texts such as Cicero and Thoreau also to be amongst the earliest theorists of translation. It was Cicero's sensitivity towards translation that gave birth to the terms such as 'word for word' translation and 'sense for sense' translation. It was Cicero who referred for the first time the systematic process of translation that was followed by his predecessors in the western world. He advocated for the fine balance between 'original text' and the 'target text'. He mentioned the sloping side of carrying forwarding the just the 'word' of the original text. However, Cicero suggested that mere word for word translation will not suffice. He advocated the idea of accepting new words from the original source text with suitable elucidation into the target text and language. Later on, Horace too laid emphasis to the process of translation and accepted that the balance between the original and target text is challenging. He was aware of the dilemma that a translator has to face while translating. He, therefore, advised the future translators to avoid being a slave to the original text though he did advocate the use of the new expression.

The Romans, thus, accepted the use of new words, expression etc. to be carried forward into the target language as one of their aims of translation was to enrich their own literary tradition. Therefore they seem to be open for 'word for word' or 'expression for expression' translation from Greek tradition into Roman so as to enrich their language and culture and they were quite successful in doing so. Thus Romans made did not make ample

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

emphasis of the 'sense for sense' translation, however, they made a significant difference between the 'word for word' translation and 'sense for sense' translation.

The Bible Translations

The Bible translation led to a great deal of acceptance in terms of use of the vernacular expression for the translation in most parts of Europe and started moving towards, though in quite a primitive form, the concept of 'equivalence' in translation. Thus, the Bible translations gave rise to the vernacular form of writing which led to the enrichment of all the European languages. The translations were also used as a defense against the uncouth and crude dogmatic beliefs that were prevalent in the church. The malpractice of the clergy was made quite difficult if not impossible by the available translations of the scriptures in the vernaculars in the emergence of new nation states. John Wycliffe, who was the first to translate the Bible, laid emphasis on the comparative study of the grammatical structure and complex meaning of words of the source text and the target text as two necessary steps in the translation process. This comparative analysis was accepted as a basic outline for translating any text by translators in other languages as well. Some of the translators also advocated for the need of an accessible and an aesthetically satisfying style in the target language text. It can be said that two major objectives of the Bible translations were agreeable intelligibility and a heartwarming style.

The Renaissance Translations:

As it is a known fact that the Renaissance gave rise to humanism and for the first time in the history of European culture, especially socio-religious culture, 'God' came into the centre rather than the 'church' and 'I' came to the centre of 'my' universe. As a result, in the Renaissance style of translation, there can be seen the creative appropriation of the source text. The target text and the target readers were given much more prominence than ever before. Mathieson's (1931) study gives a number of examples of appropriation by the English translations and translators. Earl of Survey's translations reveals a great deal of creativity in his translation of Petrarch's sonnets. He went beyond word by word or even a line by line translation. He enhanced the sense of 'I' so that his translations attain immediate impact on the contemporary readers. Thus, in the Renaissance period, there can be seen an approach among the translators towards the target text and reader-oriented translation rather than the source text-oriented translation.

Translations in Seventeenth Century

Zealous and most productive period of the Renaissance in prevailed throughout Europe from the 14th century up to a mid-seventeenth century. The major characteristic of the Renaissance was a spirit of adventure and wonder for novelty. The spirit of adventure led the explorers of Europe to go beyond their regional and continental frontiers and the spirit of wonder for novelty led them to appreciate and assimilate the best that is there in the unknown world. The translation had been one of the major sources of reception, application and assimilation. From mid-seventeenth century onwards, rationalism and inductive reasoning

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

started dominating English literature and literary criticism. Rules and regulations of literary composition, as well as dramaturgy, started being formulated by taking the classical texts of Greco-Roman times as models. Notions of imitation and decorum were expanded to the next level and the process of translation attempted systematically. John Dryden translated Epistles of Ovid into English. In his preface to *Epistles* (1680), Dryden outlined a rough theory of translation. He distinguished three methods of translations:

- (1) Metaphrase
- (2) Imitation and
- (3) Paraphrase

Dryden prescribed 'Paraphrase' as an ideal approach for translation and downgraded both 'Metaphrase' and 'Imitation'. 'Metaphrase', according to Dryden, referred to a word-by-word and line-by-line translation of the text from one language into another. Whereas 'Imitation' referred to as a free translation where translator takes imaginative flights and goes beyond the preview of translation. It is, therefore, that Dryden was critical of Ben Jonson's literal translation in the art of poetry which can be considered as 'Metaphrase' according to Dryden's classification. Cowley's translation of Pindar (1656), on the other hand, was considered 'Imitations' because while rendering the 'Pindarique Odes', Cowley had indulged in free flights of verbal fancy. Dryden viewed such imitation as 'transmigration'. True to the new classical spirit of decorum Dryden considered 'Paraphrase' to be the best method or outlook for translation. According to Dryden, 'Paraphrase' means a method of translation with some latitude, resulting in a 'sense of sense' translation. Like his predecessor Cicero, Dryden too aimed at assimilating Virgil's Latino into the Restoration English and in the process to enrich the English language. Later, Dryden views on translation can be seen echoed in Alexander Pope who also favoured the middle path and wanted the spirit of the original text to be captured in the translated text. He also laid emphasis on the stylistic details of texts.

Translations in the 18th century

The translation methods laid by Dryden and Pope were followed in the 18th century as well. Dr Samuel Johnson, in his *Life of Pope* (1779-80) held the view that a translator has the right to be read in his own terms. Hence, Dr Johnson, justifying Pope's translations, based on the fact that they are addressed to his own time and country. Thus, Dr Johnson added one more question for the translator as a prerequisite of translation i.e. along with 'what to translate?' and 'why to translate?' a translator should also pose 'for whom to translate?' Around this time, large-scale translations of already translated texts were available in order to make them appropriate to contemporary taste and language. Thus, the 18th century brought a new dimension to the translation theory i.e. target readership oriented translation and language appropriation according to the taste and current language of the time.

By the end of the eighteenth century Alexander Fraser Tyler Published, *The Principles of Translation* (1791) which was the first study of its kind in the English language.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

Tyler mentioned, along with other minor approach and methods, three basic principles of translation:

- (a) the translation must retain the complete idea of the original work,
- (b) the style and manner of writing should be of the same type as the original and
- (c) the translation should have the ease of the source language text.

Tyler did not recommend Dryden's concept of 'Paraphrase' for even this, according to him, led to lose translations. He, however, recommended 'omissions' and 'additions' in the translation in order to clarify ambiguities.

Translations in Romantic Age

The translators of the Romantic Age in the early nineteenth century were able to give the art of translation a new turn. They rejected the rationalism of the 17th century Restoration Age. They rather emphasized the crucial role of imagination. Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* had distinguished between 'Fancy' and 'Imagination'. He considered 'Imagination' to be the course of creativity.

Thus, translation too was viewed in terms of imagination i.e. as a higher creative activity. Webb (1976) showed from Shelley's writing that he appreciated translation for their ideas and other literary feature. The translators of the Romantic Age created language text an element of 'Strangeness'. Shelley aptly summarizes the Romantic predicament in *The Defence of Poetry*.

"It was as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another creation of poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flowerer and this is the burthen of the cure of Babel." (Shelly, 33)

The Victorian Translations

The Victorian translations were also anxious to receive the expressions of the remoteness of time and place of the original text. In fact, they added a new dimension to the art of translation i.e. of archaism this added an element of obscurity to literary translations. Matthew Arnold had delivered a series of lectures entitled *On Translating Homer* (1862). For him, the true judge of the translated texts are the scholars and it is only they who can judge whether a translation has more or less the same effect as the original. His advice the critic of translation was this: "Let him ask how his work affects those who both know Greek (the language of the original text) and can appreciate poetry" (Arnold, 99). Thus, according to Arnold, a translator must have to dissolve the original text in order to bring the target text reader to the source language text through the transition. This view appeared to be close to the new classical perspective though unlike them the Victorian did not see translations as a means of enriching their own culture.

Henry Wordsworth Longfellow around the same time, proliferated a literal perspective of translation while discussing his own translation of Dante's *divine comedy*. The long fellow gave more emphasis to rhyme while translating poetry. Thus, according to

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

Longfellow, stylistic features were distinctive from the spirit of the work which should also be considered, especially while translating poetry. Contrary to the view of Longfellow, Edward Fitzgerald believed that the spirit of the source text can be carried forward to the target language text. In his *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1858), Fitzgerald demonstrated that it was possible to bring a version of, if not the entire spirit of the source text, into the culture and language of the target text as a living entity. He used the analogy of ‘*a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle*’ to advocate his preference to the target text as a live and appealing work. Thus, it can be seen that by the end of 19th century, translation theory has started evaluating the translated text as an independent text and not just a parasite representing and advocating the source text only.

Twentieth Century Translations

The 20th century marks the rise of linguistic theory in general and in appreciating a work of art in particular. The impact of these linguistic and literary theories can be seen on the twentieth-century translation as well. It is interesting to note that most of these linguistic theories were developed in isolation from the main traditions of the literary stream. There can be seen a great deal of impact of these theories on the interaction with literary text and creative thinking. Later, there can be seen the impact of various theories such as American structuralism and transformational theory based on the precept of Noam Chomsky among others on the world of literary translation. It was in the 1980s that some attempts were made to combine both linguistic and literary theories of translation act. Language and literary texts are now seen to be rooted in the cultural matrices of a speech community. Thus the view is gaining ground that, “Each society will interpret a message in terms of its own culture: The receptor audience will decode the translation in terms of its own culture and experience, not in terms of the author and audience of the original documents.” (Larson, 436-37)

Thus, till the first half of the 20th century, the translator either preferred literal translations or the translation with some or maximum latitude. The translators taking liberty while translating was still considered to be ‘Free’ or ‘inferior’ translation. However, by the second half of the 20th century, the speculation started shifting from a literal or a free translation to the consensus and the commonsense approach as a middle course. This approach has started disregarding not only the sense but also the form of the original text.

Conclusion

Thus, one can see there is an extensive history of translation in the western world. The act of translation had been the source of enrichment of the language and also of the culture as in the Roman translation; it has for enlightenment and outreach of religions to the masses as in the Bible translations; it has been for refining and uplifting literary style and manner as in the Restoration age translation of French drama into English; it has been for the spiritual enlightenment from some foreign spiritual perception as ‘transcendentalism’ in 18th century England; it has also been for relishing the best of the work of art in the other language and to

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue V (December- 2018)

undertake comparative studies as in 19th and 20th century. Therefore, it can be said that translation is an integral part of language and literature studies around the world.

References

- Gentzel, Edwin. *Contemporary Translation Theory*. London: Rutledge, 1993/2001. Print.
- Kuhiwczak, Piotr and Karin Littau, eds. *A Companion to Translation Studies*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2007. Print.
- Nida, Eugin, *Toward a Science of Translating*. 1964. Print.
- Tymoczko, Maria. *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999. Print.