



International Journal of
Humanities In Technical Education
(A Bi-annual Refereed Journal)

Theorizing Historiography of Translation in India

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Translation studies resorting to history is an interesting phenomenon and a relevant exercise in many ways. However, it has its complex dimensions that we may need to consider before we nosedive into it. As a phrase, 'Historiography of Translation' comprises two of the most complex concepts/processes and the complexity deepens when these two concepts/processes are put together in a single phrase. At a juncture when we wish to commit ourselves to historiography, it might be wise to dwell upon the implications of such a pursuit.

In fact, some might question the significance attached to historiography: Why is historiography so important? We may take recourse to Lieven D'hulst who aptly titled his paper, "Why and How to Write Translation Histories?" in which he states:

Since the extraordinary expansion of the discipline in academia has led to greater autonomy and thus to new possibilities of establishing priorities, it cannot be ignored that translation studies have recently returned to history. Why? One could think of several reasons to explain this return to history. Suffice is to list them here.

- History is a practical eye-opener for translation studies.
- Insight into history gives the scholar the intellectual flexibility which he or she needs when regularly adapting his or her ideas to new viewpoints.
- Insight in history prevents the scholar from blind adherence to one single theory.
- Insight into history is may be the only way to understand the structure of the discipline, by showing the underlying relationships between divergent approaches and practices.
- Insight into history helps to develop a "culture of translation"

- Insight into history may inspire translators in search of problem-solving techniques. (p.22)

For a country that is said to have ‘translating consciousness’ and pluralistic character, these are avenues for new insights in terms of translation history. However, it is an ordeal in itself to conceptualize the methodology for it. The next important question to be addressed is, how do we go about it? D’huist further comes to our rescue:

To say what the concept means is something other than to say what exactly is to be expected from the discipline, in concrete terms, in the daily practice, so to speak. Many different methods of historiography are possible. But more basically, as far as the object is concerned, the number of possible categories of historical facts is almost overwhelming: anything in fact is a candidate, not everything is a relevant candidate a priori either. But the array still is larger than traditional historiography rooted in the history of ideas or comparative literature might let us think (p.24).

In other words, one can approach the same issue of the complexity of historiography if one examines the shortcomings that Anthony Pym points out in his paper interestingly titled, “Shortcomings in the Historiography of Translation”:

Rapid and radical changes in international relations have helped make interculturality a privileged object of historical research. At the same time, new emphasis has been placed on the history of translation as an important intercultural activity about which there is still much to learn. But as attention is turned to the names of past translators and long lists of past translations, few researchers have clear ideas about exactly what they hope to find and how they hope to find it. The historiography of translation thus remains mostly impressionistic (p.1).

Moreover, he also contends that we must seek sufficient clarity before we approach historiography of translation and advises to set the priorities of historiography right:

In an age of excessive information and limited orientation, it is simply dangerous to assume that an incipient discipline must accumulate data before it can say why it should accumulate data. Good answers depend on good questions, and neither archeology nor criticism is adequately designed to formulate the basic historical question “why?” (p.3).

In the same vein, he precisely enlists seven shortcomings:

(1) archeological accumulation of data that respond to no explicitly formulated problematic, (2) dependence on anecdotal evidence, (3) indiscriminate periodisation, (4) visions of translations as expressions rather than potential agents of historical change, (5) axiomatic privileging of target cultures, (6) the use of unfalsifiable methodological hypotheses, and (7) failure to appreciate the interculturality of the translator's position (p.15).

If there are numerous warnings and articulations of shortcomings emerging even from the West, it is easy to grasp the complexity historiography of translation consists of. Suffice it to say that there is not and perhaps cannot be a straightforward approach to historiography. Some might even go to the extent of saying that any direct or readymade approach will not yield any results. It might be wise to infer insights from where we find them and assimilate the wisdom from both the translation traditions and their respective translational practices as we proceed on the path to historiography of translation in India.

Historiography of translation will probably rest on the kind of perspective we have or evolve with respect to translation. If we get simplistic about translation, we shall have a historiography which is in consonance with such a notion of translation. On the other hand, if we can endeavour to understand translation in its varied complexities and diverse nuances, the historiography that we arrive at will be closer to the truth historiography is perhaps capable of offering. The full potential of historiography will remain elusive if we limit our concept of translation and if we theorize it in any one particular way. In other words, to translate it for us, the way we look at translation will determine the way we would eventually look at historiography and the kind of historiography we shall have. To put it more succinctly, the important questions of translation are the important questions of its

historiography as well. It is a different strand of its historiography altogether to be separately researched that we have not yet adequately related the questions of translation to the questions of its historiography. The possible explanation for such a situation is that there is no single sourcebook of these questions and issues. The important questions and issues of translations are scattered all over the writings of the various translation scholars and thinkers across continents. If we read and re-read their articulations and identify the important questions they have raised in order that we may be able to relate them to the issue of its historiography. It may also be required to relate passages which may not be deliberate and conscious articulations on this issue but may be relevant for the issue in question. A fresh and new way of relating existing ideas on translation may yield us a new way of theorizing translation and its historiography. What, then, are the important questions of translation?

Andre Lefevere and Susan Bassnett raise a few questions in the Introduction to *Translation/History/Culture* which can be easily related to historiography:

First of all, why is it necessary to represent a foreign text in one's own culture? Does the very fact of doing that not amount to an admission of the inadequacy of that culture? Secondly, who makes the text in one's own culture "represent" the text in the foreign culture? In other words: who translates, why, and with what aim in mind? Who selects texts as candidates to "be represented?" Do translators? And are those translators alone? Are there other factors involved? Thirdly, how do members of the receptor culture know that the imported text is well represented? Can they trust the translator(s)? If not, who can they trust, and what can they do about the whole situation, short of not translating at all? If a translation is, indeed, a text that represents another, the translation will to all intents and purposes function as that text in the receptor culture, certainly for those members of that culture who do not know the language in which the text was originally written. Let us not forget that translations are made by people who do not need them for people who cannot read the originals. Fourthly, not all languages seem to have been created equal. Some languages enjoy a more prestigious status than others, just as some texts occupy a more central position in a given culture than others—the Bible, for

instance, or the Qur'an. Fifthly, why produce texts that "refer to" other texts?

Why not simply produce originals in the first place (p.1)?

We can posit some of these are questions with respect to translations, translators, agencies such as Asiatic Society and translation scholars and historiographers who have provided to us a certain kind of understanding of translation history in India. One might ask why we are asking these questions in the first place. The rationale behind such disconcerting questions can definitely and must be questioned. It is not unreasonable to ask as to why it is not sufficient to see whether a particular translation is 'faithful' to the 'original' or not. This is where the concept of translation and its transformation in the post-colonial avatar come into play, as Bassnett and Lefevere expound in General Editors' Preface to *Translation/History/Culture*:

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. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulative processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us towards a greater awareness of the world in which we live (p.xi.).

The ideas which emerged in the post colonial discourse on translation can richly contribute to the issue of historiography if we can wisely relate them to the way we perceive translation as it is discussed by the editors of *Post Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*:

First, and very obviously: translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and

cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems (Introduction, p. 2).

If this be true, one can imagine a bewildering range of interpretations and insights that can be inferred from the colonial encounter. It can lend fresh perspective on the quality and kind of translations undertaken, the texts undertaken for translation, the translators and their motivations, the agencies which played the part in translation could all add to the historiography that we seek to unearth.

The need to study the power relations and equations at work in the invisible workings of translation is not a new or stray argument. There has been a consistent discourse in the West that firmly posits that power and ideology are the key terms when one seeks to understand translational practices of any time period in history. It is not that power and translation are, so to say, linked to each other by a certain theoretical perspective but power is ‘inherent in the translation process itself’. It is a commonly held forgone conclusion in the West that “[t]he key topic that has provided the impetus for the new directions that translation studies have taken since the cultural turn is *power*” (Gentzler/Tymoczko: 2002).

Even today, we are not yet free from the clutches of power that our ex-colonizer yields. The overemphasis on translations from Indian languages into English is indicative of that ‘the Empire can translate back only into English, or into that lower or at least lower-case variety of it, english, according to some pioneering and influential theorists of the subject’ (Ashcroft et al.: 1989)

It is also imperative that we adequately deal with the issue of translation decisions and choices that translators make in a given situation and the kind of translations they consequently produce. Translators can have myriad motivations to translate a certain text in a particular way. As Lefevere conveys in no uncertain terms that translations are not ‘produced in a vacuum’ and the translators operate in ‘a given culture’. It is in the way the translators perceive their roles and understand their culture that determines the way they translate. It is also pertinent to note that the way they understand both these aspects changes from one time period to another.

The pressure exerted by patrons and publishers in the modern age could now serve as an important measure of deconstructing publishing politics when we relate it to the historiography of translation. Lefevere refers to Du Bellay who provides the 'bluntest statement' of the way translator's freedom is curtailed when he says: "the obedience one owes to patrons admits of no excuse". Publishers have 'taken over from the princes and lords' and their influence on the way translations are shaped could be an interesting site of excavations.

The idea of producing the faithful reproduction of the original seems to have grown outmoded with translators and translation theorists. As Gentzler and Tymoczko would go to the extent that translation is, in fact, 'a deliberate and conscious act of selection, assemblage, structuration, and fabrication- and even, in some cases, of falsification, refusal of information, counterfeiting, and the creation of secret codes.' They also also argue that translators, thus, 'as much as creative writers and politicians, participate in the powerful acts that create knowledge and shape culture' (Gentzler/Tymoczko: 2002).

One might ask as to, how do the translators subvert the paradigm? It may be fruitful to study what feminist translators and translation theorists have to say. How a feminist translator perceives translation process and role of a translator is a rich site of an alternative historiography of translation. As Luise Von Flotow observes, "the modest, self-effacing translator who produces a smooth, readable target language version of the original has become a thing of the past(1991, p. 76)". For Barbara Godard, the notion of translation as production "is at odds with the long-dominant theory of translation as equivalence and transparency which describes the translator as an invisible hand mechanically turning the words of one language into another" (Homel and Simon:1988). According to Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (1990), "making the feminine subject visible in language is an important way of putting feminist politics into practice," and since "language cannot be neutral," she is acutely conscious of the fact that her "woman-centred focus guides and frames her translation work", as she asserts:

As a feminist translator, my choices — of words, of works to take on — are informed by the emerging women's culture, which means that our references can now be found within the sphere of work done by women. We have a

feminist dictionary, an encyclopedia, theoretical works, fiction, criticism, translations, prefaces to translations — all of these are beginning to constitute a women's culture (pp. 43-44).

It is fascinating to see the feminist translator 'affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable rereading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text'. The phrase that aptly captures the alternative paradigm of translation, '*Womanhandling* the text in translation' means replacing 'the modest, self-effacing translator' and thus, the translator goes on to become 'an active participant in the creation of meaning' (p. 15). In fact, Godard uses the term 'womanhandling' to highlight the need for the feminist approaches to translation and that feminist translators should unapologetically 'flaunt their presence and agency in the text, making themselves and their work visible', and thereby subverting the paradigm – 'reversing the age-old order of translators' and women's public and literary/scholarly invisibility'.

De Lotbinière-Harwood frankly conveyed that her translation practice is 'a political activity' with a specific agenda to 'make language speak for women'. Hence, she has no qualms in saying that her signature on a translation means: 'this translation has used every possible translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about' (De Lotbinière-Harwood, 1990, p. 9; quoted in von Flotow, 1991, p. 79).

It is easy to guess from this that if feminist translators review the translations done and try to reconstruct the past, we might possibly have an alternative historiography which will serve to make not just the language but also make history and translation 'speak for women' and render them visible in history, finally. The question however is how to encompass the large volume of translations in the country across centuries and cohesively reconstruct the past.

As it is more than clear, there are more questions than answers that one can discover. The complexities in the way translation has been perceived and practiced and the kind of motivations which have driven the publishers and translators constitute the crux of the issues of historiography. There are not and cannot be any straightforward answers to these

questions. They can only serve as pointers for us. It would be apt to return to Lieven D'hulst and take recourse to his insights:

This list of questions does not constitute a research programme, neither does it want to be exhaustive; it wants to show what can/should be covered by a historiography of translation and translation studies. In practice, there are very few examples of in-depth research projects capable of coping with many (or even several) of these questions applied to translation practice and/or translation reflection of the past (not to say modern translation research as such). The current case – eventually regretful, but that is inevitably the way many will have also to proceed in the future – is the case of the scholar working alone or within a small group, and trying to get some answers for a small number of specific questions from a corpus that is very often still unexplored.

Still, historiography should keep its ambition; simply speaking, it should aim at the best possible reconstruction of the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” [how it really was], taking into account the largest possible number of parameters. I am hopeful that this goal remains within our reach (p.31).

It might not be unreasonable for us to also be hopeful that the goal of conceptualizing the framework, methodology and possible approaches to historiography of translation will remain within our reach.

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