

Translation as a Way of Growing

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Article abstract

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TRANSLATION AS A WAY OF GROWING¹

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Résumé

Ce commentaire étudie les impératifs culturels et politiques de la traduction en tant que phénomène de croissance dans le monde contemporain. Il explique que, malgré certaines ambivalences, la traduction constitue une façon d'être créatif, de croître.

Languages develop or they are developed. When languages develop on their own, the time that it takes for the language events to unfold in a particular manner is unspecified. Viewed in one way, like many other kinds of histories, language history is nothing but a catalogue of a series of accidents — some planned, some others spontaneous, and some that come as chain reactions. In another reading, history would appear as a mirror of an age — a whole generation, a century or a millenium depicting the life of an entire nation or language. In the second sense, language history is the documentation of a series of on-going and ever-enveloping events which are all products of time. When languages develop through a historical process, whichever view of history we entertain, they take a little longer time than those that develop because of planned interventions. Languages that develop on their own can be said to have undergone **primary standardization**. Languages that are developed undergo **secondary standardization**. More often than not, in cases of the latter type, it is very difficult to differentiate between the periods of standardization and modernization. Both these processes go hand in hand in respect of these languages because of the time constraints within which these latecomers bloom. When a language undergoes primary standardization, the processes of modernization follow it in course of time.

Gone are the days when languages could develop on their own. One difference between the advent of modernism and the postmodern situation prevailing today is that all languages in the present world advance because of various internal and external pressures. As against this, there was a time when a language could develop as a consequence of natural historical forces. Such primarily standardized languages, however, had no model before them to imbibe. In comparison, languages of today have a number of models of primary development before them, and they have an option to follow any one of these models (with suitable modifications, wherever necessary) or chart a completely new course by scrupulously avoiding the known course of action. For today's languages to develop, therefore, there have to be policies that have already worked elsewhere and these have to be re-implemented or there must be models which can be translated, if the planning elites want it to be so. The options here are between being innovative or being translative.

It would not take one long to realize that between the two options, translativity is a better, surer and faster way to develop. Innovation (howsoever ideal it may be theoretically), like any act of creativity, runs the risk of being a failure and counter-productive. If nothing, it is surely more time consuming than any translative strategy. It is not surprising that many of the underdeveloped and developing languages today start from a point

where they attempt at translating metaphors, myths, proverbs, terms, sciences, cultures, and language structures. I would not hesitate to imagine that much of what we call convergence emerges from translative actions which members of converging speech communities use as gap-filling devices. They also try re-creating certain language functions, something that allows dominance over others in the same speech community. That is the reason why many languages of the Third World — be it Hindi in India or Hausa in Nigeria — very quickly learn the art of dominating over other indigeneous languages, at least in formal speech functions.

Since it is increasingly becoming evident that the translativity model is the fastest way of growing, it places a tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of the translators and language planners of the underdeveloped language communities. Those engaged in such work of translating (voluntarily or willy nilly, because of pressure on them) have to be ready to listen to a lot of criticism and unkind remarks. But in all fairness, one has to give them and their products or attempts time (to see if they gain acceptance). For instance, in spite of the best efforts of a term planner or a translator, the terms created by him or her may take time to gain acceptability.

Any critic of a glossary of technical terms would easily lay the blame on the translator without realizing how the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on linguistic relativity also works in acceptance or rejection of such proposals for reform. Like by language and by culture, one is also bound by the science and technology one inherits naturally. It is only normal for a critic to view any other type of categorization of knowledge and belief with scepticism. What is expressed as a dissatisfaction against a term is often actually a refusal to appreciate another kind of system. When one translates economics, politics, science or culture of another community, the terms and expressions one opts for have this primary aim of being a match for what they name. It is not fair to blame the translator for introducing something *foreign*, because the ultimate goal of the translator is to use his discretion of coining a term as an instrument of growth. The sooner the translations are naturalized the faster will the language grow.

Almost all the modern Indian languages have a number of grammatical devices including some syntactic operations which did not exist in their early stages or in their initial prose literature. Such imprints existed not only in known and visible aspects of grammar such as punctuation and lexis, they permeated even in syntax. The tradition of translating the ancient Indian texts into modern Indian languages always existed but translation from the non-western, non-Indian sources began only in 1801 in Urdu (from Persian *Ārāish-e-Mahfil*) and in 1805 in Bengali (*Totā itihās* from Persian *Tutināmeḥ*; also *Pārasya itihās* from Arabic, available in 1834). Beginning from 1803, one finds a regular flow of translations from English into modern Indian languages starting with *The Oriental Fabulist* into Hindi, Urdu and Bengali (and later into Marathi in 1806).

These trends not only influenced the grammatical structure of modern Indian languages, they also started interlingual rendering of texts among the modern languages, such as Bengali *Kṛttivāsa Rāmāyana* into Manipuri *Langoi Shagd Thaba* in 1802. Or, consider Marathi *Rājā Pratāpādityāce Carita* (1816) which was a translation from a Bengali book published in 1801 (*cf.* Sisir Kumar Das 1991: 75-77). Notice that this is only a revival of the tradition of horizontal translations in India where translations between ancient Indian languages and other Asian languages were a common phenomenon. Whether one talks about Ashvagoshā's *Buddhacarita* or the Thai *Ramāyana*, or the Tibetan translation of the Bengali *Caryāpada*, or the Japanese temple inscriptions of Pali sayings, there are a number of philological studies on this aspect. I have claimed elsewhere that the horizontal translation (*cf.* Singh 1990) must be the base on which one can build a new translation theory, which is sure to be different from the one based mainly

on vertical translations. Any theory of translation based on the political equations such as $SL \simeq$ Dominant and $TL \simeq$ Colonized, oppressed or dominated language is bound to carry a bias which will ultimately affect our using translation as a tool of development. Because it is now clear from the work of Trivers 1985 and Layton 1989 that there is no objective basis for speaking in terms of **higher** or **lower** forms of entities either in the physiological evolution or in the evolution of social behaviour. If so, there is no reason why we should let the ills of vertical vision colour our theory of translation or development.

Let me make it clear that while evolution knows no verticality, development (whether natural or planned) may give rise to an unequal relationship close to the notion of verticality. I am only trying to raise the question that challenges the validity of using the experiences of the *developed* as the basis of building a theory of language development as has been done by almost all the western scholars including Joshua Fishman, Charles Ferguson, Jirí Neustupný, Jonathan Pool, and others. Some of them have since changed their positions though. I take the position that much of the monistic theoretical arguments on language development came from the sociolinguistic background and bias of the Western scholars who grew up in a very different kind of social condition than one experiences in the world waiting to be developed (Singh, forthcoming). There was not necessarily an organized effort to drown the voice from the East. This is because so many scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds could not have otherwise agreed upon a common characterization of development as a *homogeneizing* process (cf. Huntington's 1976 nine-fold characterization of modernization).

Some readers of this piece may find a contradiction in my position because I reject *homogeneizing* as a characteristic of modernization (and development), and rate *translativity* as better way of growing than *innovation* and at the same time argue in favour of a horizontal translation process as the one that is ideal for the developing world. One might say that translation from the developed to the underdeveloped would in effect promote *homogeneity*, and defeat all our talks of pluralism. However, I do not see any contradiction in this because translation, in the first place, can never be like an act of duplication or photography. Translations are at best approximations, the closeness of which will depend on various factors. Translation is thus always \pm **SL text**. And this indeterminacy is what is interesting about translation because it makes translation parallel to creativity of other kinds. It also explains how translation is a way of growing — growing to be different.

Note

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