UNIT 2

Translation: Concepts and Key Figures

2.1 Warm Up

Examine any electrical gadget at home. You will notice instructions for its use given in many languages. Why do you think they are provided? Look at the instructions in English for the same gadget from different companies. Observe their similarities or differences. Each translator has taken a different approach to the same material.

Different people translate various materials into different languages. Are there common factors that guide or determine these translations? How do we make sense of the translations even from languages we do not know?

Translators stand between two different languages and cultures. They are constantly making decisions at various levels when rendering the source language text (ST) into a target language text (TT). This unit introduces us to a few translation theorists and the theories of translation they arrived at, working at a particular time and in a particular culture.

2.2 Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Identify key figures in the field of translation
- Describe basic concepts of translation
- Apply the concepts in different contexts of translation
- Discuss current debates in key concepts

2.3 Key Concepts in Translation

Translations are usually renderings of a chosen text from a time gone by into a modern language. Many people have translated Shakespeare

into Indian languages. Some years ago Roberto Calasso translated the *Bhagavata Gita* into modern Italian. But no one will translate 'Harry Porter' into Latin or 'The Dark Knight' into Sanskrit. A literary translation exists in two worlds; as a work of literature and a work of translation. For those who do not know the original language, the translation is the primary text. One of the most perplexing questions in translation studies is whether a translation belongs to the Source Language or to the Target Language. Another worry and argument are over what makes a successful translation. How far can the translator push the language to accommodate the original ideas and, when that link begins to break up, how is she or he to leap across the gap created? This unit, which elucidates the key concepts in translation, will try to provide answers to some of the queries.

2.3.1 Source Language

The language from which you translate is called the SL or source language. The term source text or ST is the original text that is to be translated into another language.

In the context of multiple translations like the ones from English to Hindi to Tamil, which would be the source language? Also, how to categorise something as a translation when it is the original text for nonnatives? (e.g. English translations of Homer or Virgil) When we read Marx or Valmiki, if we do not know German or Sanskrit, what we are reading is the original through translation, i.e. that translation is our original.

2.3.2 Target Language

The language into which you translate is called the TL or target language. The term 'target language' is applied to the language that a source text is being translated into.

When talking about Target language, one cannot ignore the target culture, since translations are for a specific reader, bound to a specific culture. English translations of classical texts introduce the issue of

English as target language medium for world readers. What happens then to other languages of the world?

2.3.3 Afterlife

More than 80 years ago, Walter Benjamin, a German, used this word in an article called "The Task of the Translator" (1923). How did it reach us? Through translations into French and English about which there are arguments even today! Why is this theory so important? Because it came at a time when everyone else in Europe said that translations were inferior and secondary form of scholarship. Benjamin also said something else which startled people. He said that great literature was to be given the same respect as that given by society to religion. He said that the pure artistic energy of the original piece of literary writing made it sacred. He then said that translation expresses "a great longing" to create a perfect complement or equivalent in another language. "Of all literary forms, it is the one charged with a special mission." Benjamin used words like "survival" and "living on" and said, "A translation comes not so much from the life of the original as from its afterlife...it tests the growth of languages. In translation, the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air."

2.3.4 Linguistic Systems

The goal of translation is to bridge the source and the target texts while keeping an eye on the translator's social and cultural world. Linguistic untranslatability is due to the difference in the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL).

For example, there is no equivalent for the Sanskrit word *upaveetham* (Tamil-*poonool*). What it actually means is the thread which symbolically binds you to the Vedic way of life. This is impossible to convey fully in English, so we simply say, "sacred thread."

2.3.5 Cultural Systems

Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL of relevant situational features.

For example, idioms and expressions may be culture-specific which can make them untranslatable or difficult to translate. For example, expressions such as 'hot dog' (American, a specific type of food) and 'Kangaroo Court' (from Australia, meaning an unofficial court organized by people who have no authority or knowledge of the law.)

1 The problems of the world are easily soluble in wine.
2 Pay your taxes with a smile.
3 Think of the phrase, "a warm welcome." Such a welcome would be welcome in a cold climate but not in our country where it is 40°C in the shade in summer. These are instances of cultural play of words.

Pause and Proceed

Provide translations for the following idioms in your mother tongue. If not possible, provide equivalents for the same.

1. He gave me a nasty look.

   _____

   _____

2. While in Rome, do as Romans do.

   _____

   _____

3. Carrying coal to Newcastle.

   _____

   _____

4. He kicked the bucket.

   _____

   _____

2.3.6 Faithfulness

How would you convey to Josy (who knows only English) what Beena (who knows only Malayalam) wants to say? You have to be very careful

about saying exactly what Beena wants to say to Josy. Not just the words, but also the tone and mood in which she said the words. A slight variation and you will cause a lot of discomfort. What about justice? Would it not be unjust if you introduced a joke or an exaggeration of Beena's words and emotions while transmitting her message to Josy? Remember, Beena is helpless and at your mercy. Josy too is hoping that you will be a responsible friend and not twist meanings lazily or mischievously. So translators have to be just and faithful.

For example:Radio Mirchi: Sema hot machi

BSNL: One India

Pause and Proceed
Translate the following newspaper headlines into Hindi and Tamil.

1. Terrorists attacked Sri Lankan team in Lahore

   _____

   _____

2. Five year prison term for surgeon

   _____

   _____

3. Kerala takes on Mumbai in the final test

   _____

   _____

4. I am learning to cope with criticism: Sachin

   _____

   _____

5. Low Pressure brings welcome relief to besieged farmers

   _____

   _____

Compare the translations with the original. If the translation is ineffective or inadequate, find out the reasons for the same.

2.3.7 Confusions

What if Beena used a word or a phrase for which there is no equivalent at all in English? Suppose that word meant something else to Josy? In India if we say, "He is very dark," about a man, we mean that he is dark-skinned. In Britain, "He is very dark," only means that that person has dark hair. The reference is not to his skin! So these then are some of the problems that translators from one language into another language face. They have to find solutions because their cultures are so different.

For example, a statement like Jesus "met" someone must be carefully translated into a language which distinguishes between "met for the first time," "met habitually" and simple "met."

Make a list of well-known advertisements in your mother tongue and translate them into English. Analyse them for signs of confusion or faithfulness.

For example:

Airtel–Express Yourself

ICCI Prudential Insurance–Long Live

Pulsar–Definitely Male

Britannia–Eat healthy, think better

2.3.8 Equivalence

The distinguished translator from Telugu into English, Ranga Rao said in his article "Problems and Practice—Towards an Indian Protocol" (1995) that "translation is a transmission of creative energy. Like electrical energy the longer the distance it has to travel the greater the risks of loss." If we are moving from Malayalam into Tamil or from Bengali into Marathi, the transmission loss is not much. We may find equivalents without much difficulty. But "if we are crossing the seas, it is nearly impossible." We have to accept that it is unrealistic to expect perfect equivalences. He makes a detailed list of foods, costumes, plants, familial relationships, terms of endearments, curse-words, abuses, rites and rituals and places them under a heading

called ethnicity, the E-Factor. "The higher the E-Factor the harder the translator's struggle." Let us look at the titles of works to see how equivalences are developed. A famous Tamil title was *Iravu Choodar* which means the "Flame of the Night." But the translator believed it would sound like a lurid romance. So she suggested using just the name of the heroine, Yamini. Interestingly this name also means the dark one or the night. An Oriya title read *Danapani* which means the bread /grain and water, the two things we need to survive. Since the story was about an ambitious and ruthless clerk, the translator decided on the title: The Survivor.

Pause and Proceed

Identify the equivalence in the following idioms and phrases

1. Keep an eye on him

_____

_____

2. Cool as cucumber

_____

_____

3. Working round the clock

_____

_____

4. Beating around the bush

_____

_____

2.4 Introduction: Key Figures

If you are setting out to translate you do not have to know about theories and norms. It might even confuse you and block your creativity. In fact, as you translate, you will not remember the theories at all. But if you are going to teach translation sometime in the future, it is best to know what some leading thinkers from different cultures had to say about the

function and behaviour of translations in their time. It is not surprising, of course, that most of the theories came from practising translators themselves. Just as a person, who does not know how to swim, will not be able to advise you about saving your life should you fall into a lake, it would be wise to listen to masters of their craft about translation, always keeping in mind what Susan Sontag said, "In a literary translation, there can only be a superior, never a perfect performance." Nevertheless, from Tulsidas, in the 15th century when he was beginning his translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* into Avadhi, to Tejaswini Niranjana in our own time, translators have always felt strongly about what works and how it works.

2.4.1 St. Jerome (331- 420 AD)

Believed to be Greek, St. Jerome is best known for translating the Bible directly from the Hebrew into Latin, ignoring the advice of even St. Augustine who preferred the Greek version. He is the patron saint of translators and was canonized by the Catholic Church.

He was the first intellectual from the ancient world who thought deeply about translation. Jerome felt that the more the translator strained at a faithful reproduction of the author's words and images, the more he would have to sacrifice meaning and beauty. He felt it was extremely difficult to preserve the beauty of the original writer's words. "A writer has chosen a word to express a thought; I have no word of my own to convey the meaning." What then was the best way to deal with the impossibility of translation? In a letter to his critics, Jerome wrote, "The proper way to translate is keeping the sense but altering the form by adapting...the words to suit our own language...a literal translation from one language into another obscures the sense." In his preface to one of his translations he wrote, "I have partly discharged the office of a translator and partly that of a writer."

2.4.2 John Dryden (1631-1700)

Influential English poet, literary critic, translator, and playwright, John Dryden dominated the literary life of Restoration England to such an extent that the period came to be known in literary circles as the 'Age of Dryden.' Dryden translated classical Latin works into English. About his literary intentions, Dryden said, "I have not tied myself to a literal translation; I

have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken if he had been born in England, and in this present Age." Dryden used the word metaphrase, the method of turning an author, word by word and line by line from one language into another language. He called translators the "metaphrasers."

Pause and Proceed

Fill in the blanks

1. _____ is the patron saint of translators and was canonized by the Catholic Church.

2. Ignoring the advice of _____, Jerome translated the Bible directly from the Hebrew to Latin.

3. A _____ translation from one language into another obscures the sense.

4. Restoration England came to be known in literary circles as the

   _____

5. Dryden called translators _____

2.4.3 Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

Walter Benjamin, in his article "The Task of the Translator", elevates translation to a level of the sublime. His theory of translation can only be understood in religious terms.

Benjamin felt that translations should not try to transfer meaning, but rather translate as close to the original as possible, by transferring its syntax and concepts: "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully."

2.4.4 Roman Jakobson (1896–1982)

To the structuralists a translation is not a single structure; it is a unit containing two or more structures. The semantic content and formal properties of the original text, together with the aesthetic system of the language in which it is written, intersect with the same features in the

language into which it is relocated. **Roman Jakobson** divides translation into three categories: '1) Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. 2) Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. 3) Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.' According to Jakobson's taxonomy, one, who translates 'legal language' into the language of everyday use, would be performing an intralingual translation, while one, who offers a commentary on an obscure artwork, would be undertaking an intersemiotic translation. Neither can be called acts of translation in the strict sense of the term. Only someone who translates a text from one language to another can be considered as doing translation proper.

2.4.5 Eugene A. Nida (1914-2011)

The theories of Eugene A. Nida on equivalence illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of linguistic theories. To Nida, a language is a series of verbal symbols that represent aspects of a culture. The meaning of a verbal symbol is defined indirectly by contrastive symbols. This is a classic structuralist position of binary opposites, where meaning is made possible in terms of differences and not similarities. For example, we understand the colour 'white' as that which is not 'black.' However, we find that Nida moves away from the limitations of structuralism when he insists that all languages and cultures are continually in the process of change and such changes occur on all levels of structure. He also concedes that creative writing cannot always be controlled by fixed rules. However, Nida was not able to free himself totally from the concept of 'universal models' that all languages share. The act of translation involves proper adherence to such thought. A translation aims at complete naturalness of expression universal models of discourse that translators and interpreters seek to carry from one language system to another.

2.4.6 Lawrence Venuti (1953–)

"The Translator's Invisibility" by Lawrence Venuti provides an account of the history of translation from the 17th century to the present day. Venuti's

translation makes a fundamental distinction between domestication and foreignization drawing heavily on Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion that the translator can take the reader to the author, or bring the author to the reader. Domestication refers to 'the type of translation in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers,' while 'foreignization means a target text is produced which deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original.' Using texts and translations from Britain, America, and Europe, Venuti proves that 'fluency prevailed over other translation strategies in shaping the canon of foreign literature in English.' He goes on to clarify that even when languages are similar, they differ in the use of word units and in assigning a meaning. Consequently, readers, when confronted with a translation, automatically fall back on what they do know and prefer. They read and evaluate the translation mainly against linguistic patterns, literary traditions, and cultural values in their own culture.

2.4.7 Susan Bassnett (1945–)

Susan Bassnett founded the Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies, in the 1980s. Her "Translation Studies" (1980) and "The Translator as Writer" (2006), influenced by postcolonial theories, are mainstays in the field of translation.

She compares the hierarchic opposition (superior-inferior) between the original work and translation to the hierarchic opposition between the European colonizer culture and the colonized culture. This hierarchy, she said, is Eurocentric, and its spread is associated with the history of colonization and imperialism.

She also describes the idea that translators are like cannibals who eat only people they respect. The translator makes the original text a part of himself/herself and brings out something very valuable.

Pause and Proceed

Choose the correct answer for the following sentences.

1. Walter Benjamin's theory of translation can only be understood in _____ (linguistic/religious/filmy) terms.

2. Dryden _____ (translated/transliterated/ transcreated) Latin works.

3. According to Jakobson, translation involves two _____ (different/ distinct/ equivalent) messages in two different codes.

4. The translator has to look beyond the _____ (context/ subtext/ text).

5. Bassnett's translation theories are based on _____ (Postcolonial/Orientalist/folklore) theories.

2.5 Indian Perspectives on TranslationStudies

In the contemporary Indian context, Indian Writing in Translation is a bridge between Indian Writing in English and Writing in the *bhashas*. Translation studies in India are concerned with a quest for identity and a quest for India. Some of the key figures in this field are:

2.5.1 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

An interesting contrast is Rabindranath Tagore, poet, and translator from Bengal. Tagore's creative genius found expression in songs, poems, plays, novels, essays, short stories, satirical pieces, and textbooks for children. In his translation of *Gitanjali* or "Song Offerings", he refashioned Bengali songs to suit an English sensibility. It has been pointed out that he modified, omitted, and rewrote his poems to cater to a Western audience. Tagore fashioned a rhythmically free, almost biblical style of prose-poetry, similar to the cadence familiar to the English. Commenting on his translation of the *Gitanjali*, he says, "I simply felt an urge to recapture, through the medium of another language, the feelings, and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in past days…" There are mixed opinions regarding Tagore's self-translations. Tagore himself was scathing about his English translations in his later years, often expressing regret that he had ever done them. Critics like Sisir Kumar Das prefers to see his translations as not translations at all. Instead, he rates Tagore as a 'bilingual writer,' whose 'translations' can be read as a sort of commentary on his Bengali works.

2.5.2 A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993)

Scholar, philologist, folklorist, translator, poet and playwright A.K. Ramanujan's reputation as a translator grew around finely crafted books like "The Interior Landscape: Classical Tamil Love Poetry" (1967) and "Poems of Love and War" (1985) that contained selections of his English versions of Classical Tamil poetry. "Speaking of Shiva" (1973) brought together Ramanujan's translations of more than two hundred *vachanas* by four major *bhaktas*. In his theoretical expositions, Ramanujan distinguishes between 'context-sensitive' and 'context-free' modes of thinking. According to him, Euro-American culture with universal testaments of law. such as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is context-free. Indian way of thinking with its complex sets of standards, depending on various factors of identity such as birth, occupation, life stage, karma, and dharma, is context-sensitive. Drawing from this idea we can say that Ramanujan prefers a translation that re-vitalizes the context of its composition. In his essay "On Translating a Tamil Poem", Ramanujan commented on the task of the translator: "The translation must not only re-present, but represent, the original. One walks a tightrope between the To-language and the From-language, in a double loyalty."

2.5.3 Purushotham Lal (1929–2010)

A teacher of English Literature and a scholar of Sanskrit and Bangla, P. Lal is the founder-editor of Writer's Workshop publications, Kolkata. In 1979, he published a condensed version of the *Mahabharata*. he has transcribed the entire *Mahabharata* into English.

Lal has written at length about his theory of transcreation. These are his own words: "First, I have kept the contemporary age very much in mind because I strongly believe that a translator speaks only to his age unlike the creative writer who may speak to succeeding generations as well…Secondly, I stress the dramatic elements of a text especially those episodes that bring out shades of character…thirdly, I treat myths and epics as oralculture experiences and try to use an idiom that has a spoken impact. The epics cannot be treated as print-culture texts… Finally, I try to retain the inspiring, "unsaid," "unsayable" experiences of a narrative."

2.5.4 Ganesh N. Devy (1950–)

Ganesh N. Devy, the literary critic and activist, has worked to preserve oral tribal cultures and stories in the written form. Devy is interested in the historical context of translation activity in India. He says, "Every major civilization in the world has its own peculiar attitude to translation. Such attitudes are deeply influenced by the philosophy of life and death in each civilization. In civilizations dominated by Judaic and Christian view of life, a translation is treated as a 'follow up', or a 'second version' of the 'original' text. Therefore, a translation is not considered as important as the original text. But, in civilizations that permit the idea of a 'rebirth', translation is seen as 'yet another original.' That is why in India every new version of the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* comes to be seen as equally sacred."

2.5.5 Tejaswini Niranjana (1958–)

Tejaswini Niranjana has made commendable contributions to the field of translation studies through her theoretical propositions. Her major contribution in this field is in the linking of colonialism, translation and power. In her "Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context" (1992) Niranjana elaborates upon the politics of translation and the use of translation as a tool by the colonizers. She examines how the colonizers used translation socially, politically and culturally to continue their domination. She says that by giving English audiences a 'fixed' picture of the colonised people through the translation of Indian texts, translators created people without history. The colonisers translated the Indian texts in such a way as to justify their ideology of domination. Niranjana has also done extensive work on the cultural aspects of translation that become evident in the transference of customs, values and ideas from one culture to another.

Pause and Proceed

1. State whether the following statements are true or false.
   - (a) Tagore's translation of Gitanjali (Song Offerings) won the Booker Prize in 1913.
   - (b) A.K. Ramanujan's says that translation must not only re-present, but represent, the original.

(c) For the past 30 years, P. Lal has been transcreating the entire *Mahabharata* into Marathi.

(d) According to Devy, in civilizations that permit the idea of 'rebirth', translation is seen as 'yet another original.'

2. Marathi writer and translator, BhalachandraNemade states that one can find equivalences in languages from geographically closer languages, say Marathi and Gujarati. Do you agree that the same would be true of Tamil and Malayalam. Why? Why not?

_____

_____

_____

2.6 Recap

- Most of the translation theories came from practising translators themselves
- St. Jerome is the patron saint of translators
- John Dryden translated works by classical Latin writers
- Walter Benjamin, in his "The Task of the Translator," elevates translation to a level of the sublime
- Roman Jakobson introduced the notion of 'equivalence in difference'
- Eugene Nida's contribution to translation theory is Dynamic Equivalence v A translator, according to Venuti, recreates the impact of the original text within the limits of the translator's own language system
- Susan Bassnet states that hierarchy in translation is Eurocentric, and its spread is associated with the history of colonialization and imperialism
- The translation must not only re-present, but represent, the original–A. K. Ramanujan
- Devy points out that Western linguistics is essentially monolingual and rules out the very possibility of interlingual synonymy
- The language from which you translate is called the SL or source language

- The term "target language" is applied to the language that a source text is being translated into
- The translatability of a work is defined in terms of the "capacity of the work to live on"
- Linguistic untranslatability is due to the difference in the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL).
- Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL of relevant situational features
- Translators have to be just and faithful
- Dynamic Equivalence refers to sense by sense translation; while Formal Equivalence refers to word by word translation

2.7 Activities

1. Jot down an example for each of the key concepts you have learnt.
2. Translate the titles of five books/movies/music albums from your own language into English. Also, mention the concept you used to translate them.

2.8 Practise to Perfect

1. Discuss the contribution of any two translators to translation theory. (200 Words)

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain the concept of translatability and the factors affecting it. (200 Words)

_____

_____

_____

_____