

NEGOTIATING THE BLANK: POWER AND ADEQUACY IN
TRANSLATION STUDIES

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Copyright @Author**Corresponding Author: ***Dr. Muhammad Mahboob
Ahmad**Abstract**

This essay reviews the major theoretical paradigms of translation and argues that what unites them is not a shared definition of transfer but a shared inability to supply one. From Jakobson's designation of interlingual transfer as translation proper, through the equivalence and systems theories of Nida, Vermeer, Even-Zohar, and Toury, to the cultural turn associated with Lefevere and Venuti and the postcolonial interventions of Niranjana, Asad, Cheyfitz, and Rangarajan, the discipline has repeatedly named a criterion of adequacy that it cannot then specify. This essay calls that unspecified criterion the "blank," and argues that the "blank" is never left empty: it is filled by whoever holds the authority to fill it. Translation is accordingly proposed here as a movement from one set of circumstances to another whose defining feature is the negotiation of power, and the study of any structure of power in human society is therefore the study of translation. The argument is developed through cases that exceed the linguistic—scripture recitation without comprehension, the codification of proper cricketing technique, and the Bollywood adaptation of Shakespeare—and closes on machine and model translation, where the criteria of adequacy have been transferred to systems that cannot be asked to justify them.

"As a matter of fact, I don't believe that anything can ever be untranslatable — or, moreover, translatable."
— Jacques Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" (2012, p. 365)

"We must be in translation between cultures and between groups within our own culture if we are to understand the dynamics of our imperialism."

— Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism* (1997, p. xxii)

"In English and in many other languages the word for translation is a two-headed beast. A translation names a product — any work translated from some other language; whereas translation, without an article, names a process — the process by which 'a translation' comes to exist."

— David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* (2011, p. 11)

Introduction: The Two-Headed Beast and the Blank

While a definition of translation—the product that Bellos (2011) differentiates from the process—is at the heart of discussions in the field, scholars of Translation Studies do not agree on any composite formulation that captures the essence of the process. This always-present absence is an acknowledgment of the inadequacy of the term to describe the various

processes that create the product. The field has expanded to incorporate several successive turns, and Cheyfitz's (1997) assertion that translation is an inter-cultural and intra-cultural process—an echo of Roman Jakobson's three-tiered conception of the interlingual, the intralingual, and the intersemiotic—carries with it the recognition that these processes serve imperial ambitions. Rangarajan (2014), to name one recent critic, sees translation as integral to

the imperial enterprise in British colonial India. The definitional elusiveness of translation is precisely what enables the dynamics of imperialism to continue functioning in the postcolonial and neocolonial world (Cheyfitz, 1997, p. xxii).

This paper explores the theoretical paradigms of translation—the definitions, types, and purposes articulated by different schools of Translation Studies—and proposes that the ultimate concern of translation, whether as a function of language, as a move from one culture to another, or as a move from one medium to another, is the study of power relations that appear to be expressed in language but are in fact the expressions of social, political, cultural, and financial movements. Translation, in the definition offered here, is a move from one set of circumstances to another: a transference from a host “blank” to a target “blank.” I contend that to study any form, structure, or expression of power in human society is to study translation, and that all negotiations of power are acts of translation.

It is important to qualify that the word transfer is used here not to indicate perfect or complete movement, but rather the dual and simultaneous image schemata of source-path-goal and containment, an idea proposed by Celia Martín de León. As Kershaw and Saldanha (2013) note, the first schema imagines translation as movement along a route from one point in space to another, while the schema of containment defines translation by its spatial boundedness (as cited in Kershaw & Saldanha, 2013, p. 137). Translation is thus both movement and the restriction of movement. The spatial movement so defined is the movement from the source—the language, culture, history, societal norm, or system of significations in which the translated text occurs—to the target, the corresponding system into which it is rendered. That such movements are geographic is metaphorical, as Kershaw and Saldanha observe, but their discussion unloads the metaphor by stressing that the idea of a target implies unidimensional movement (Kershaw & Saldanha, 2013, p. 140), whereas the work of postcolonial scholars such as Rangarajan (2014) shows this to be a movement in several directions at once. When the relics of

a saint are transported from one end of the earth to another, the exchange of symbolism is symbiotic: the relics retain the ritual practices of the source culture while imbuing those of the culture to which they have been carried.

The geographical idea of a target also implies stability, precision, and accuracy (Kershaw & Saldanha, 2013, p. 140), but for Kershaw and Saldanha each work of translation is really another form of production (p. 147)—which brings translation, in all its variations, to bear on the globalized present as a further form of imperial knowledge production (Cheyfitz, 1997). When this idea is extended to the production of texts in the neocolonial world, to the non-verbal signs of commercial enterprises like Hollywood and Bollywood, or to the cultural onslaught of a global American culture, or the surprising global presence of Korean culture, the act of transfer becomes ever more complicated, as several cultures come together not in a melting pot but in a salad bowl, where the blurring of source-target binaries occurs simultaneously with the reaffirmation of cultural difference. Thus when the Pakistani poet Taufiq Rafat attempts to render the classical Punjabi poet Qadir Yar's long poem "Puran Bhagat" into English, he abandons the original's *si harfi* form for want of any parallel in the target language. Similarly, when Vladimir Nabokov renders Russian poetry into English, he titles the resulting book *Verses and Versions*, indicating thereby the production of a new object rather than the recovery of an old one. This destabilisation of the source-target metaphor is at the heart of the field's successive redefinitions of itself.

Propriety and Hierarchy: Jakobson, Derrida, Benjamin

Any discussion of what translation includes must begin with the taxonomy that has organised the field since 1959. Jakobson (2012) divides translation into three kinds: intralingual translation, or rewording within a single language; interlingual translation, the movement between two languages, which he names "translation proper"; and intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, the rendering of verbal signs through non-verbal sign systems (p. 127). The taxonomy is descriptive in appearance

and hierarchical in effect. The adjective *proper* does not merely distinguish the second category from the other two; it subordinates them. To name one form of transfer proper is to leave the remaining two improper, and Jakobson need not use the second word for the reader to supply it. The power of a hierarchical structure rests not only in what is stated but more so in what is left unstated, and it is in this silence that Jakobson's schema exercises its longest authority. Every subsequent quarrel in the discipline—over adaptation, over intermedial transfer, over whether the dubbed film or the illustrated scripture or the Bollywood remake constitutes translation at all—is a quarrel about a word Jakobson used in passing.

What is striking is that Jakobson's own essay unsettles the hierarchy it establishes. Having installed interlingual transfer as the proper case, he concedes that "poetry by definition is untranslatable" and that "only creative transposition is possible" (Jakobson, 2012, p. 131). The concession is fatal to the taxonomy. If the paradigmatic literary object cannot undergo translation proper, then the proper case is precisely the case that cannot be performed, and the category survives as an ideal that no actual translation occupies. Translation proper becomes a blank at the centre of the system: named, authorised, and empty. The improper forms—rewording, transmutation, transposition—are not deviations from a norm but the only practices that exist.

Derrida (2012) presses on this blank rather than repairing it. In "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" he asks what recommends a translation as relevant, and finds the answer to be economic. The relevant translation is the one that presents itself as the transparent double of the original, discharging a debt by rendering as much as possible in as little, word for word, so that the original appears not to have been touched. Relevance is thus a measure of a translation's success at concealing its own labour, and Derrida's reading of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* as *relève* demonstrates that the concealment is never complete: the translated word carries into the target a surplus that the original did not hold, elevating and preserving at once. This is the position his epigraph to this paper announces—that nothing is ever

untranslatable, or, moreover, translatable. The formulation is not a paradox to be resolved but a description of an economy in which the debt can be neither defaulted upon nor discharged. Venuti (2004) states the same economy in plainer terms when he describes what a translator does as an attempt "to compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain" (para. 3). Propriety, in Derrida's sense, is the name we give to a debt we have agreed to consider settled.

Benjamin (2012) arrives at a comparable disturbance from the opposite direction. In "The Task of the Translator," he removes the reader from the transaction altogether: translation is not addressed to those who do not understand the original, and its purpose is not communication. What translation serves instead is the original's afterlife, its survival into a condition its own language could not sustain. The task is not to resemble the source but to release, in the target, an echo of what Benjamin calls "pure language"—the fragments of a greater vessel that source and translation together approximate without either completing. Fidelity, therefore, is not a virtue of correspondence, and the literal interlinear version of scripture, which no theory of equivalence could defend, becomes the ideal case. Benjamin thus reverses Jakobson's hierarchy without contesting its terms: what is relegated to the improper margin is where translation does its real work.

From Equivalence to System: Nida, Skopos, Polysystem, Norms

The discipline's response to this difficulty, across roughly three decades, was to replace the question of propriety with a series of more manageable criteria. Eugene Nida's (1964) distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence is the first and most influential attempt. Formal equivalence orients the translation towards the structures of the source; dynamic equivalence orients it towards the response of the receptor, and is achieved when the new audience reacts to the translated message substantially as the original audience reacted to the original. Nida's work was carried out for and through the American Bible Society, and dynamic equivalence was elaborated as a

working instrument of missionary translation, designed to render scripture into languages and cultures with no prior Christian vocabulary. The theory that most confidently claims to serve the receptor was thus formulated in the service of a project whose purpose was to change what the receptor believed. Adequacy defined as audience response is adequacy defined by whoever has determined in advance what the response should be.

Functionalism carries the relocation further and states it openly. In the *skopos* theory of Reiss and Vermeer (2013), the governing consideration is neither the source text nor the reader's response but the purpose for which the translation is produced. The same source may legitimately yield entirely different translations depending on the commission, and fidelity to the original is demoted to one possible purpose among others. What makes *skopos* theory important for the present argument is that it introduces into the theory a figure the earlier models had kept outside it: the commissioner, the party who specifies the purpose and pays for its execution. Power ceases to be an implication of the translation and becomes a named term in the description of it.

The descriptive turn appears to abandon the search for criteria altogether, and in doing so produces the sharpest formulation of the problem. Even-Zohar's (2012) polysystem theory treats translated literature not as a derivative category but as a system operating within a larger literary system. He identifies asymmetry as structural: translated literature tends towards the centre when a literature is young, when it is peripheral or weak, and when it is passing through a turning point or vacuum (Even-Zohar, 2012, pp. 163-164). This is an account of why the traffic between languages runs as unevenly as it does. Translation becomes "no longer a phenomenon whose nature and borders are given once and for all, but an activity dependent on the relations within a certain cultural system" (Even-Zohar, 2012, p. 167). Toury (1995) then makes the decisive move. Declining to define translation in advance, he proposes to reconstruct the norms that govern the texts a receiving culture treats as translations (p. 169). The prescriptive judge has been removed from the discipline, but the judgment has not been

removed from the practice, and the descriptive scholar's neutrality consists in declining to ask who within the receiving culture was in a position to set its norms.

The Cultural Turn: Rewriting, Patronage, Invisibility

The work of Lefevere (2012) announced what has since been called the cultural turn, and its premise was that translation could not be understood as a transaction between texts because it had never been one. Lefevere's contribution to this reorientation is the concept of refraction, which he defines as "the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work" (p. 205). Translation belongs with criticism, historiography, anthologising, and teaching to a set of performances that produce and maintain literary reputation; and since most readers encounter those literatures through such refractions rather than through the originals, the refraction simply is the original for all practical purposes (Lefevere, 2012, p. 216). What governs refraction is patronage, which Lefevere analyses as comprising "at least three components": an ideological one that limits what may be said, an economic one that assures the writer's livelihood, and a status component that confers position (p. 206).

The category was designed for exactly the case that stands at the head of English translation history. The King James Bible, which Cronin (2012) calls the most famous translation in the English language (p. 473), announces its patronage in the alternative name by which it is known: the Authorized Version is a text that declares in its title the source of its authority. A monarch sanctioned the enterprise, appointed and instructed its committees, and lent his name to the result. This is why a refraction, in Lefevere's phrase, is "the perfect indicator of the dominant constraints" operating in both the source system and the receiving one (Lefevere, 2012, p. 207). It is in this light that Barnstone's (1993) definition of translation as the "art of revelation" (p. 265) should be read—not as a claim about inspiration but as an unintended description of how translations acquire the standing that inspiration is supposed to confer.

Venuti's (2008) account of invisibility describes the modern form of the same effect, achieved without any patron's signature. Publishers, copy editors, and reviewers have trained readers, Venuti (2004) argues, to prize an easy readability that makes a translation "appear untranslated," giving the illusion that one is reading the original. Invisibility is thus not a professional misfortune but the mechanism by which one culture's terms are presented as no terms at all—and the domestication it enforces is what Venuti's counter-proposal of foreignising translation is designed to interrupt.

Yet invisibility is not only a loss. The elision of difference that Venuti diagnoses also licenses the non-authoritative version, the adaptation that does not pretend to fidelity, and these have historically been the vehicles by which subordinated literatures have entered circulation. This is the complication that Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002) address when they observe that the relation between translation and power is metonymic as well as metaphoric (p. xvii): the translated text does not simply stand for its source, it stands in for it, and the part that has been made to represent the whole may be selected by either party. Gentzler's (2002) own resolution is to borrow Gayatri Spivak's notion of a selective essentialism—a provisional and strategic acceptance of the categories one is otherwise committed to dismantling.

Colonial Translation: Niranjana, Asad, Cheyfitz, Rangarajan

If the previous sections have shown propriety and fidelity dissolving when asked to specify what an adequate transfer would consist of, colonial translation is where that dissolution ceases to be a philosophical difficulty and becomes an administrative opportunity. Someone must decide what the native text means, and the decision does not wait for a theory of meaning.

Niranjana's (1992) *Siting Translation* remains the founding statement of this position, arguing that translation in the colonial context does not represent a pre-existing native subject but participates in producing one. The colonised are constructed in hegemony, and translation is among the practices through which that

construction is carried out. Her governing example is William Jones, whose philological labour on Sanskrit texts was inseparable from his juridical labour of codifying Hindu law for the East India Company. The native is thus dispossessed of his own text on grounds of unreliability, and the translation that replaces him is presented not as an interested version but as the recovery of what the tradition had always meant before its own custodians corrupted it (Niranjana, 1992).

Asad (1986) supplies the structural point that Niranjana's case history illustrates. His thesis is that the whole enterprise of cultural translation "may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies" (Asad, 1986, p. 164). Whether a language will submit to transformation is not a matter of individual skill but is governed by "institutionally defined power relations between the languages/modes of life concerned" (Asad, 1986, p. 157), and because the languages of the colonised are *considered* weaker in relation to English, they are the more likely to undergo forcible transformation in translation (pp. 157–158). Where the anthropological translator claims final authority over the subject's meanings, Asad (1986) writes, "it is then the former who becomes the real author of the latter" (p. 162).

Cheyfitz (1997) extends the argument to the point where translation ceases to be a metaphor for empire and becomes its instrument. Reading the Renaissance rhetorical tradition alongside the Anglo-American law of property, Cheyfitz shows how Native relations to land were rendered into English legal categories that had no place for them, so that a form of tenure the common law could not recognise became, in translation, an absence of ownership.

Rangarajan's (2014) *Imperial Babel* is valuable precisely because it declines to close this account into a single instrumental thesis. Translation in the long nineteenth century served the colonial project, but it also exceeded it, generating attachments and curiosities the administration could not direct. Her concept of pseudotranslation names one form this excess takes: the paratextual apparatus, and especially the footnote, which swells until it displaces the

text it was appended to (Rangarajan, 2014, p. 26). Rangarajan's oriental tales show these paratexts rebutting and reinforcing one another within a single volume (p. 28), which is to say that the colonial translation is not a unified act of appropriation but a site of unresolved contest.

Counter-Translation: Spivak, Anthropophagy, Rafat

Spivak's (1993) "The Politics of Translation" begins by relocating the translator's obligation. Translation is the most intimate act of reading, and the translator's first duty is not accuracy but surrender to the text's seduction. The failure she diagnoses is not the mistranslated word but the confident, fluent English that arrives in its place: a "translatese" in which a Palestinian woman's prose becomes indistinguishable from a Taiwanese man's. A translation may be lexically unimpeachable and still perform the erasure, since what has been lost is not information but the resistance of one language to another.

Spivak's (2012) "Translation as Culture" supplies the corresponding case at the other end of the transaction. The aboriginal ex-serviceman who narrates his part in the freedom struggle in an oral formulaic mode, and who speaks of Gandhi throughout, is not speaking of Mohandas Gandhi; Gandhi has become the metonym for the leadership of the struggle as such (p. 248). The most legible symbol of nationalist authority has been absorbed into a vernacular formulaic system and repurposed there, and the direction of transfer runs from the metropolitan archive into the subaltern one rather than the reverse.

The Brazilian anthropophagic tradition converts that observation into a programme. Andrade's (1991) *Cannibalist Manifesto* takes the Tupinambá ritual devouring of a captured enemy and proposes it as the model for Brazil's relation to European culture. Haroldo de Campos develops this into a theory of translation as "transcreation," in which the translator does not serve the source but feeds on it. Vieira's (1999) account of this poetics stresses what the metaphor accomplishes theoretically: it abolishes the debt structure that Derrida identified, since the cannibal owes nothing to what he has eaten.

Victor Kiernan closes his introduction to his translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz with the following observation:

At its present stage of development Urdu would seem to an onlooker to stand in urgent need of a system of punctuation. In the meantime the student of Urdu verse must learn to appreciate the differences between its flow, its natural intervals, its logic of imagination, and those of Western poetry. (Kiernan, 1971, p. 20)

Taufiq Rafat (1982), himself an established English poet, undertakes to render Bulleh Shah from Punjabi into English and observes casually that certain conventions in the source poetry have no parallels in English, or for that matter in European literature (Rafat, 1982, p. xiv). The sentence relocates the inadequacy. What differs is who is authorised to declare a language insufficient. The blank has not been filled in Rafat's account; it has changed hands.

Beyond the Linguistic: Scripture, Sport, Cinema

Jakobson's (2012) third category—intersemiotic translation or transmutation—is not a marginal or metaphorical extension of translation but the case in which the power relations traced above operate with the fewest constraints, precisely because no source text is available against which the rendering can be checked.

Scripture in a non-Arabic-speaking Muslim polity makes the point sharply. The overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims do not speak Arabic, and in Pakistan the ordinary relation to the Quran is one of accurate recitation without comprehension. Translation is therefore simultaneously indispensable and beside the point. What secures the arrangement is a paratextual convention: the doctrine of *i'jaz*, which holds the Quran inimitable, is registered in the habit of titling renderings as translations of the meanings rather than translations as such, so that Pickthall's (1930) translation presents itself as *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. The hedge is doing considerable work. It concedes the necessity of the transfer while withholding from the resulting text the name of the thing it is.

Cricket supplies the same structure in a domain with no text at all. The game's technical

orthodoxy was codified in coaching manuals written by Englishmen for English conditions. Subcontinental batting has accordingly been assessed for propriety rather than efficacy, its wristiness and improvisation read as deviation from a norm the deviating party had no part in setting. The more interesting case is earlier and is a genuine reversal. Ranjitsinhji's leg glance was a stroke the manuals did not contain and initially could not classify, and within a generation it had entered the canon of orthodox technique—while *The Jubilee Book of Cricket* (Ranjitsinhji, 1897), which appeared under his name, became a primer of English cricketing style.

Cinema shows the transfer being performed openly and without apology. Bhardwaj's (2014) *Haider* renders *Hamlet* into a Kashmir of the mid-1990s, and grafts onto Shakespeare's plot the disappearances and interrogations of the Indian counter-insurgency, with Basharat Peer (2008) as co-writer. The film uses the canonical status of its source as licence to make claims about Kashmir that could not otherwise have reached a national audience. The debt runs backwards: Shakespeare secures the film's hearing, and the film supplies Shakespeare with a political content he did not have.

Machine, Crowd, Model: The New Instrumentalism

Cronin's (2012) account of the translation age proposes that translation has entered a condition of third-system dependency, in which human capacity is exercised only through, and increasingly within the limits of, the tools that humans have themselves created (p. 470). Translation ceases to be a linguistic function performed by human agents and becomes a function distributed across an apparatus that also determines the parameters of correctness. What counts as a good or relevant translation is settled at the interface of a machine that has acquired the power to determine not only how to translate but what is worth translating at all. *Google Translate* remains the clearest instance of what this does to the translator's invisibility. The system's crowd-sourced improvement mechanisms convert the unpaid corrective labour of very large numbers of anonymous users into a proprietary asset, and the invisibility

that Venuti (2008) diagnosed as a professional injury becomes, at scale, a business model. Translation between two languages for which little parallel data exists has commonly been routed through a high-resource pivot, and in practice that pivot is English. A rendering from Punjabi into Sindhi may therefore pass through an English representation neither language required, so that a transfer between two neighbouring literatures is mediated by the language of the empire that governed both.

Large language models alter the transaction again, and appear at first to reverse it. The user thus occupies the position of final arbiter that the whole preceding history of the discipline has struggled to locate. The appearance is misleading in one important respect. The alternatives among which the user adjudicates are themselves selected by the model, and the criteria by which they were selected are not available for inspection. Where Jakobson left the criterion of adequacy unstated and the colonial administrator supplied it by fiat, the model supplies it from a distribution of prior usage that cannot be interrogated.

Conclusion: Translation Is Power

The theories reviewed here differ in almost everything except the shape of their difficulty. Jakobson names a “proper” translation and concedes that the paradigmatic case cannot be performed. Nida makes “adequacy” a matter of the receptor's response and leaves unexamined who determined what that response should be. Skopos's theory names the “commissioner” without acquiring any means of questioning him. Toury hands the criterion to the “receiving” culture and declines to ask who within it was positioned to set the terms. Lefevere and Venuti locate the authority in “patronage” and in the “regime of fluency” that renders it invisible. Niranjana, Asad, Cheyfitz, and Rangarajan show what happens when that authority is held by an administration rather than a publisher. Spivak, the anthropophagists, and Rafat show that it can change hands. The machine and the model show it becoming, once again, difficult to see.

What persists across all of them is what I am calling the “blank”: the space where a criterion of adequate transfer ought to be, and is not. It is

occupied by the philologist-magistrate, the annotating editor, the sanctioning monarch, the commissioning client, the box office, the coaching manual, the doctrinal hedge, the training corpus. To identify translation with power is therefore not to advance a metaphor but to report what the discipline has repeatedly discovered and repeatedly declined to state: that a transfer whose adequacy cannot be specified will be adjudicated by whoever is in a position to adjudicate it, and that the study of who occupies that position is the study of power itself.

While in the Saidian sense the colonised always seem dispossessed, translation is also the mode by which established hierarchies are disrupted. Kiernan finds Urdu in urgent need of a system of punctuation; Rafat finds English without parallels for the conventions of Punjabi verse. The master's language fails, and the rendering of a native poem into the language of the master reverses the dynamics that were assumed to govern the exchange. The transference of one (blank) into another (blank) has occurred. This state of blankness is the necessary state of translation, and the necessary condition of the power that fills it.

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