

A Theory of Translation: A Reflection

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Asked whether he thought about theory when he translated, A K Ramanujam is said to have come back with, "Does a carpenter think about theory when he carports?" This counter question, if it is not followed by a qualified stretch of sentences might lead to an impression, which is not right viz. that there is no theory of carpentry. A carpenter's carpenting behaviour is neither instinctive nor genetic. There is a cognitive grid, a cerebral matrix, a mentally represented knowledge, which is what drives a carpenter to do what he does. This is the 'carpentering competence'. Such a cognitive grid exists also for the translator which is what drives his translations and which may be called 'translating competence'. There is a need to unspool this grid, to access and define its being and nature. Chomsky and Co took 40 years to unveil 'grammatical competence'. We may take more. I don't agree that translation is a subjectively conditioned hermeneutics. It is in the ultimate run hermeneutics, but not subjective. That there is no science or theory or are no laws of translation, as Peter Newmark does, seems an extreme position to take. It is illogical to say that if we can't access the mental representation, it is subjective, but if we can, it is objective. And to find out what this grid looks like, what its constituents are etc. is NOT to be prescriptive\normative.

There are basically two types of phenomena in the universe: rule-governed phenomena and creatively rule-governed phenomena. The latter are those that are created by the human mind or have to do with consciousness. Language is the best example of a creatively rule-governed phenomenon. Translation is another. 'Translating competence' is perhaps a composite module. The 'rule-governed' part would perhaps mean that like in human language there are parts of translation theory which are not functions of cultural distinctiveness any more than the explanation for the phenomenon of the falling object or the running train or the computer chip or the

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economic law of demand and supply are functions of cultural distinctiveness or of a societal ethos.

We need thus to identify these generalised crossculturally valid ways of talking about the being, the analysis and the evaluation of a translated piece, having allowed a cultural/societal input.

Theories, to be so called, should be globally valid. That is, the theory should hold for all instances of the domain of inquiry. In illustrative words, a Paninian theory of language should be true of all languages. A Derridan theory of literature should hold good for all literatures. Explanations of translative acts that are language-specific and culture-bound cannot be theories. They are descriptions/documentations of local facts.