

POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION THEORY FOR LEVERAGING TRANSLATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By

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Abstract

Postcolonial translation theory examines crucial interconnections between postcolonial theory and translation studies. With international languages such as English, French, Spanish and Arabic spoken increasingly across the world, more people become multilingual thereby making translation an important enterprise. Postcolonialism is generally used to cover studies of the history of the former colonies, studies of powerful European empires, resistance to the colonialist powers and, more broadly, studies of the effect of the unbalance of power relations between colonised and coloniser. Notable in postcolonial studies is the Indian critic and translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who elaborates her concerns about the ideological consequence of the translation of Third World Literature into English and the distortion this entails. Spivak speaks against Western population who expects writings from outside Europe to be translated into the languages of power: English, French, Spanish, etc. Such translation, according to Spivak, eliminates the identity of politically less powerful individuals and cultures. Essentially, Spivak's translation strategy demands that the translator closely understands the language and situation of the original. Based on the Spivak's translation strategy, this paper seeks to demonstrate to what extent postcolonialism can leverage translation in the 21st century literary context. The paper concludes that the link between colonisation and translation plays an important role in disseminating an ideologically motivated image of colonised people, which bring leverage in the 21st century.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, postcolonial translation theory, colonisation, leverage, 21st century.

THÉORIE DE LA TRADUCTION POSTCOLONIALE POUR TIRER PARTI DE LA TRADUCTION AU XXIE SIÈCLE

Résumé

La théorie de la traduction postcoloniale examine les interconnexions entre la théorie postcoloniale et les études de traduction. Etant donné que les langues internationales comme l'anglais, le français, l'espagnol et l'arabe se parlent de plus en plus à travers le monde, de plus en plus de personnes deviennent multilingues, faisant ainsi de la traduction une entreprise importante. Le postcolonialisme est généralement employé pour couvrir les études de l'histoire des anciennes colonies, les études des empires puissants européens, la résistance aux puissances coloniales et, plus extensivement, les études de l'effet du déséquilibre des rapports de force entre colonisés et colonisateurs. Notable dans les études postcoloniales est le critique et traducteur indiens Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak qui élabore ses opinions sur la conséquence idéologique de la traduction de la littérature du tiers monde en anglais et la distorsion impliquée. Spivak parle contre la population occidentale qui veut que les textes venant dehors de l'Europe soient traduits en langues du pouvoir : l'anglais, le français, l'espagnol, etc. De telle traduction, selon Spivak, élimine l'identité des individus et des cultures politiquement moins puissants. Essentiellement, la stratégie de traduction de Spivak demande que le traducteur comprenne de près la langue et la situation de l'original. Basée sur la stratégie de traduction de Spivak, cet article cherche de démontrer dans quelle mesure le postcolonialisme peut tirer parti de la traduction au contexte littéraire du XX^e siècle. L'article conclut que le lien entre la colonisation et la traduction joue un rôle important dans l'épanouissement de l'image idéologiquement motivée des peuples colonisés, qui apportera l'équilibre au XX^e siècle.

Mots-clés : théorie postcoloniale, théorie de traduction postcoloniale, colonisation, effet de levier, XX^e siècle.

Introduction

There are several theories formulated to advance the course of translation studies. Prominent among these are linguistic theories of translation, systems theories of translation, philosophical theories of translation as well as the postcolonial translation theory. Whereas linguistic theories of translation and

the other groups of translation theories move from word to text, but not beyond, the postcolonial translation theory considers the text in its cultural environment. The main preoccupation of the postcolonial translation theory is the shift from language to focus on the interaction between translation and culture.

Based on cultural matrix, postcolonial translation theory examines essential interconnections between postcolonial theory and translation studies. In this regard, in *Introducing Translation Studies*, Jeremy Munday (2001, p.127) notes that postcolonial translation theory deals with “the way in which culture impacts and constrains translation. In other words, the postcolonial translation theory moves “from translation as text to translation as culture” (p.127).

This paper, which is based on the postcolonial translation theory, primarily examines the link between postcolonial translation theory and the postcolonial theory. This will lead us to discover the ways in which postcolonial translation theory brings leverage to translation studies in the 21st century.

The Postcolonial Theory

Simply put, the postcolonial theory is about colonialism with emphasis on the effects of colonialism on both the colonised and the coloniser. Edward Said, a Palestinian American Columbia University professor of Comparative Literature, is widely believed to be the founder of the theory. He became famous after the publication of his book, *Orientalism* (1978).

In spite of the importance of other key figures like Gayatri Spivak and Bill Ashcroft et al with regard to the postcolonial theory, Edward Said is considered the initiator of the theory. In “Edward Said: the Postcolonial Theory and the Literature of Decolonization”, Lutfi Hamadi (2014, p.40) affirms that Edward Said,

believes that the consequences of colonialism are still persistent in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed, which permeates many excolonies. The powerful colonizer has imposed a language and a culture, whereas those of the Oriental peoples have been ignored or distorted.

This reality prompted linguistic and cultural imbalance in favour of the Western colonisers which led to the eventual birth of postcolonialism.

The Postcolonial Translation Theory: Gayatri Spivak Translation Strategy

Although Edward Said is the basic proponent of the postcolonial theory, Gayatri Spivak is regarded in translation studies as the postulator of postcolonial translation theory. In *Introducing Translation Studies*, Jeremy Munday (2001, p.133) affirms that Gayatri Spivak, the Bengali critic and translator first raises “concerns about the ideological consequences of the translation of the Third World Literature into English and the distortion this entails”. Spivak expresses her disapproval of the fact that Western populations expect writings from outside Europe to be translated into the languages of power.

Spivak (1993/2000, pp. 399-400) has addressed these concerns in her seminar paper titled “The Politics of Translation”. According to her:

In the act of wholesales translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translateese, so that the literature [...] in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan.

By this observation, the Spivak translation strategy, which characterises the postcolonial translation theory, is born.

As Munday (2001, p. 134) has noted, culture, as opposed to language, is the matrix of postcolonial translation theory based on Spivak translation strategy. It “draws on the postcolonial concepts of rhetoric, logic and the social” thereby “necessitating the translator intimately understanding the language and situation of the original” (p.134). This is the main objective of the postcolonial translation theory.

The intersection of language and culture is the vision of postcolonial translation theory. Jean-Marc Moura (1999, p.4) shares this view with Gayatri Spivak. In *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale*, the French literary critic observes that,

Les œuvres auxquelles s'intéresse la critique postcoloniale considèrent les formes et les thèmes impériaux comme caducs, s'efforcent de les combattre et de réfuter leurs catégories (lors mêmes qu'ils sont

dominants dans la société où elles paraissent) avant de proposer une nouvelle vision d'un monde caractérisé par la coexistence et la négociation des langues et des cultures.

[The works in which postcolonial criticism is interested consider imperial forms and themes as obsolete, strive to oppose them and refute their categories (even when they are dominant in the society where they appear) before proposing a new vision of a world characterised by coexistence and negotiation of languages and cultures].

It is in this sense that postcolonial theory provides platforms for coexistence and negotiation of the languages and cultures involved in the translation process.

This draws back attention to the concepts of rhetoric, logic and the social mentioned by Jeremy Munday. If the logic of postcolonial translation theory is the proposition of a new vision of the world based on language and cultural coexistence and negotiation, the rhetoric is no longer colonial but postcolonial. This means that the colonised is invited to participation together with the coloniser. This reality reinforces rhetoric thereby creating leverage in contemporary society.

Postcolonial Translation Theory for Leverage in the 21st Century

The underlying objective of the postcolonial translation theory is to eliminate imbalance between the languages of the colonisers and those of the colonised. The result of this creates leverage. The following are the ways in which leverage is created in the 21st century translation process.

The Decentralisation of the Language of Power

The elimination of the language of power improves communication. This process is called language decentralisation. Effectively, in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (2014, p.2) re-affirm Spivak's position that,

Recent work in translation studies had challenged the long-standing translation as inferior to the original. In this respect, translation studies research has followed a similar path to other radical movements within literary and cultural studies, calling into

question the politics of canonization and moving resolutely away from ideas of universal literary greatness.

The subversion of the literary canon is the most essential character of postcolonial literature. This language and cultural situation makes Maryse Condé cited by Lydie Moudileno (1997, p.39) to declare that:

Nous sommes prisonniers des structures érigées par la génération précédente et qu'on prétend vouloir respecter. Or, il faut les briser.

[We are prisoners of structures erected by the preceding generation that we are pretending to be respecting. It is necessary to break them down].

Since then, Maryse Condé's novels are in the forefront of decentralisation of French language.

Just like in postcolonial literature where writers are preoccupied with the distortion of literary canons, postcolonial translation theory engages in decentralization of the languages of power for the benefit of communicative translation.

A Metaphor for Postcolonial Writing

In "Cross-Linguistic Interpretation of Metaphor in Yoruba Proverbs: A Pragma-Cognitive AI-Assisted Study", Zaynab Raji-Ellams (2025, p. 230) affirms that,

A metaphor is a basic cognitive mechanism that shapes how people see and think about the world, not just a decorative linguistic element. Metaphorical mappings from more tangible, bodily experiences help make abstract ideas like love, death, time, and morality understandable.

In this regard Maria Tymoczko (2014, p.22) elaborates on how translation is employed as metaphor for postcolonial writing. This becomes a tool for leverage in contemporary translation. In "Postcolonial Writing and Literary Translation", Tymoczko observes that

Analysis of literary texts emerging from peoples who have been colonized or oppressed invites metaphor: the criticism of such texts speaks, for example, of voices silenced, margin and centre, and epistolary exchange (p.21).

Effectively, it is this metaphoric use of language that amounts to what Moura describes as negotiation of languages and cultures.

Tymoczko gives an illustration. According to her, “Figurative language is used: in English, for example, the newly invented vehicles propelled by an internal combustion engine was sometimes known as the “*horseless carriage*” (p.21). In a more expressive way, Moura refers to the metaphoric or figurative language as interlanguage. According to Klaus Vogel cited by Moura, (1999, p.81) interlanguage is

la langue qui se forme chez un apprenant d’une langue étrangère à mesure qu’il est confronté à des éléments de la langue-cible, sans pour autant qu’elle coïncide totalement avec cette langue-cible. Dans la constitution de l’inter-langue entrent la langue maternelle, éventuellement d’autres langues étrangères préalablement acquises, et la langue-cible.

[language that is formed in a learner of a foreign language as he is confronted with elements of the target language, without it completely coinciding with this target language. The constitution of interlanguage includes the mother tongue and possibly other previously acquired foreign languages, and the target language].

Interlanguage is an interplay of languages and cultures comparable to metaphoric language employed in translation as a leverage against the colonial languages of power. Some of the novelists who use interlanguage in their works include the Nigerian Amos Tutuola and the Ivorian Ahmadou Kourouma. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), Tutuola uses Yoruba English to improve communication with his Nigerian audience, by more importantly,

bringing into light some cultural significant of the Yoruba people. In this regard, in “Understanding *The Paim-Wine Drinkard*”, Patrick Hogan (2000, p.36) asserts that,

Though Tutuola has often cultivated the persona of naïf, sometimes he steps out of that persona. Once, when describing his literary aims, he dropped his faux naïf mask and explained, “I noticed that our young men, our young sons and daughters did not pay much attention to our traditional things or culture or customs. They adopted, they concentrated their minds only on European things. They left our customs, so if I do this they may change their mind ... to remember our customs, not leave it to die ... That was my intention”

This makes reference to the metaphoric significance of interlanguage.

The significance of interlanguage in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* soon became global as it went beyond literature permeating *Translation Studies*. According to Ulf Hannerz (2022, p.30),

Abroad, readers tended to invent their own Tutuolas: one finds the Yoruba heritage, another finds Jungian stereotypes, yet another the globally recurrent mythological themes of a Joseph Campbell. Perhaps a temporally fitting metaphor for the variety of imaginative reading of a mid-twentieth century body of work is that Tutuola’s writings offer readers a Rorschach test, with the polysemy of given inkblot forms meeting their personal minds.

In a similar way, Kourouma employs his native Ivorian Malinké language in mixture with French in his novels, especially *God Is Not Obligated* (2000). In this regard, in “Caractéristiques lexicales et variations du français dans Allah n’est pas obligé d’Ahmadou Kourouma”, Esther Jones (2024, web) reaffirms this in her abstract that

In *Allah n'est pas obligé* [God is Not Obligated"], Malinké language, the novelist's mother tongue that has taken precedence over French, transcribing African ideas to enrich French in numerous other acceptable ways of expressing certain concepts. This underscores the fact that any language is capable evolving.

As a matter of fact, Jones' observation adds impetus to Tymoczko's view of the transforming power of metaphor in postcolonial writing and literary translation.

A Tool for Redefining Cultural Identity

The postcolonial translation theory is a tool used in redefining cultural identity. Bassnett and Trivedi (2014, p. 2) note that

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 system.

This entails that one of the basic objectives of the translation theory is the redefinition of cultural identity. This explains why "At this point in time, postcolonial theorists are increasingly turning to translation and both re-appropriating and reassessing the term itself" (Bassnatt and Trivedi, 2014: 2). Good examples in this regard are the Creole writers of the Francophone Caribbean such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant. They engage in Creolisation of French language in their novels as a mark of Caribbean cultural identity popularly known as Creoleness. For example, in "Creoles as Trauma and Identity Markers in Patrick Chamoiseau's "Childhood" and Benjamin Zephaniah's "Dis Poetry", the author (name unavailable) affirms in the abstract of the work that,

The Caribbean is defined by multilingualism and multiculturalism arising from the cultural integration of people from various backgrounds that formed it. Creoleness, as language and culture, is therefore a critical tool for the integration and interaction among

Caribbean's that evolved out of the need for survival and identification,

Conclusion

Anchored on postcolonialism, the postcolonial translation theory deals with the way in which culture impacts and constrains translation. The theory is based on Gayatri Spivak's translation strategy which is concerned about the imbalance existing between colonial languages and those languages of the colonised peoples.

In close relationship with postcolonial literature, there are three ways in which postcolonial translation theory creates leverage in the 21st century. Firstly, by decentralising the language of colonial power thereby maintaining or challenging structure between cultures. Secondly, this is realised through the use of interlanguage, the metaphoric usage of language to draw attention to the hidden voices of people silenced by colonialism. Finally, postcolonial translation theories brings leverage in the way its application redefines cultural identity.

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