2021

Perpetual Emergency: The Self, Translation and Border Crossing

Umar Nizarudeen
University of Calicut, India, umarn1@gmail.com

Perpetual Emergency: The Self, Translation and Border Crossing

UMAR NIZAR

Cognitive militarism posits autobiography against translation: the self is supposed to be available to itself, as one ventricle is to oneself, even when the affective work of love is impeded. The self is a bootstrap loading operation, whereby a sui generis being manifests itself. It is not poetic subjectivity, but mechanical autopoiesis and auto narration that are foregrounded. Accordingly, there is no need for translation, since the self would narrate itself, as an auto-affective self-propelling mechanism. Therapy would be anathema. (For Sartre, psychoanalysis would be akin to bad faith, because it posits the super ego in the paternal figure of the big Other. In vulgar interpretations of Jung and Dostoevsky, the new age-guru Jordan Peterson finds the perfect antidote. The self-coincides with itself. This pagan coincidence of the self with itself is problematic to say the least.)

> Using Jung, Paterson smuggles in neo-Nietzscheanism:
>
> In traditional communities, awe-inspired imitation of the actions of that primary personage, modified by time and abstracted representation, retains primary and potent force (even in revolutionary cultures such as our own). The action of the preexperimental man consists of ritual duplication and simultaneous observation of taboo—action bounded by custom. When such a man endeavours to produce a particular end, he follows an exemplary pattern. This pattern was established by his ancestral progenitors in a time subsuming all time, and in a "divine" (actually, communitarian-intrapsychic) space. (Peterson, 1999)

Since the self and its subjectivity are easily available and accessible across borders (but only for a certain class of people, a fact often elided), the changes in linguistic ecosystems are only a matter of gradation. The glacial pace of civilizational change is not this calculus of semantics. This gradation of languages is a function of space, since at any one point on the globe, there is no incomprehensibility between languages. Kannada speakers are apparently seamlessly intelligible to Tamil speakers at the Bangalore-Hosur border. The gradation between languages is infinitesimal at any one point in space, given that the sample taken organically comprises solely of inhabitants of that particular location. Language is an unbroken cognitive continuum according to this view, and so is the self, a perfect entity. Such a position implicitly rules out the role of translation as well as the presence of refugees, migrants, and other possibly existing forms of diversity within this spatial calculus of subjectivity. This also rules out emergence of novel subjectivities of any sort. Subjectivity and space become merged into one single entity of spatial subjectivity. Language games as suggested by Ludwig Wittgenstein are papered over with the idea of a subtle calculus of gradation between words and semantic units in language. The infinitesimal gradualism of the process of constructing meaning binds down the affective work of love and hospitality, turning into what Jacques Derrida terms `hostipitality.' The subject of Being itself is `change'.

Translating discrete words from source language into host language presents an infinitesimal calculus of change. But translation of the other hand is nothing short of a radical translation. Trickle-down semantics seldom functions. The referential felicity of translation is a wager, a game and not an infinitesimal calculus of caution. Only the self is autobiographically translated into itself in this infinitesimal solipsistic calculus of caution.

Cognitivism thus seeks to get rid of radical alterities. In the absence of radical translation, communicative action in the form of self-narratives merely serves to elide over diversity and differences. The refugee self becomes the ultimate anchor in these `stormy waters of nascent autopoiesis. Rather than a word-to-word cognitive translation process of meaning making, what actually occurs on the ground is a more radical translation or active construction of meaning. JL Austin suggests that language is what use it is put to. But language is also the way it affects people and enchants the world around it. Thus, a non-cognitive, non-utilitarian, non-positivist approach to translation from source language to host language will be more fruitful.

If for thinkers from Aristotle to Heidegger, `language is the house of Being', then Slavoj Žižek opines that `language is the torture house of Being'. Meaning cannot just be coaxed out from language. Language like nature is not a benign entity, but `red in tooth and claw'. Linguistic hindrances block the free flow and transmission of even the phatic function of language in such a way that something as innocuous as `I love you' can be misconstrued as being covetous. Thus, the contractual human bonds break down under the regime of the simulacra calculus of space in such a way that humans abjure their camaraderie.

Walter Benjamin provides some key insights into the host language translation process. The host language functions as an incubator for ideas. It is a radical form of change, nothing short of a revolution in linguistic spirit. Semantic translation or word-to-word translation or literal translation favour the source language, whereas the free translation approach would prefer the host language/target language where the semantic content finally finds its resting place. It is in this spirit that Benjamin would opine that 'the original must be faithful to the translation'. Thus, a radical alterity is being created by way of translation. Hindi, Greek or Latin are not made into German, but the contours of the German language are so expanded that it can encompass the lifeworld of Hindi, Greek or Latin.

Romantic aggrandizement of the self is ruthlessly critiqued by St. Augustine when he says `build up yourself and you build up a ruin.' Thus, the self is an entity antagonistic to any possibility of translation. The one doesn't exist, only the many do, since any entity in any source language can be translated into any other host language that exists.

Works Cited

Peterson, Jordan. *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief.* Routledge, 1999.