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Reframing Translation: An Ecological Perspective

Sudhi P S

Research Scholar,
Centre for Translation Studies,
SSUS, Kalady, India

Abstract: This paper rethinks translation studies through an ecological framework, proposing an integrated approach that considers language, culture, and environment as mutually constitutive systems. It moves beyond the traditional source–target text dichotomy to examine how translations function within broader ecological networks of meaning, power, and survival. While translation studies have made significant strides in various interdisciplinary directions, a notable vacuum persists in addressing environmental literature, particularly at the theoretical level. This gap is critical given the rising global concern for sustainability and ecological consciousness. The paper undertakes a critical survey of how environmental thinking has evolved within translation discourse and identifies emerging paradigms that align translation practice with ecological ethics. By highlighting the necessity of an ecologically informed translation theory, and calls for a reorientation of translation studies toward sustainability, responsibility, and interconnectedness.

Index Terms - Eco-translation, Ecolinguistics, Translation Ethics, Sustainability, Environmental Humanities

I. INTRODUCTION

It took centuries for humanity to fully realize the extent to which the Industrial Revolution, driven by the forces of colonization and capitalist expansion, along with the utopian idea of a "new world," had disrupted the natural balance of the earth. Initially celebrated as a triumph of progress and human ingenuity, the Industrial Revolution set into motion patterns of environmental exploitation, resource depletion, and social reorganization that fundamentally altered the relationship between humans and their environment. As new civilizations expanded and urbanized landscapes replaced natural ecosystems, nature and humanity came to be perceived not as interconnected, but as two distinct and opposing forces. This conceptual separation intensified over time, ultimately contributing to the emergence of ecology as a formal field of study dedicated to understanding the complex interdependencies within the natural world. Ecology, evolving as a "new integrative discipline" (Odum, 1977), sought to bridge the widening rift between scientific inquiry and environmental awareness, influencing a diverse array of disciplines, including economics, literature, anthropology, and cultural studies. From this interdisciplinary momentum emerged new areas of thought such as ecological economics, ecological criticism, and ecological anthropology, each seeking to incorporate ecological perspectives into their core frameworks. In the literary sphere, writers and thinkers began to reestablish biological and environmental connections within their narratives, responding to the pressing concerns of ecological degradation, the collapse of biospheres, rampant pollution, and the looming threat of global warming. These environmental crises gradually became central thematic concerns in literature, reflecting the anxieties and challenges of a modern society grappling with its environmental impact. In response, the school of thought known as ecocriticism emerged, committed to critically examining literary works through an ecological lens, exploring how narratives either reinforce or resist dominant ideologies about nature and human society. This ecocritical approach not only broadened the horizons of literary analysis but also created the intellectual conditions necessary for integrating principles of green politics into the wider

field of literary studies. As the ecological consciousness embedded in literature expanded, its influence naturally extended into translation studies, giving rise to eco-translation, a field that emphasizes the ecological dimensions of translating texts across languages and cultures. In this way, the ripple effects of ecological awareness have continued to shape not only how literature is written and read but also how it is transmitted and interpreted across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

II. THE BEGINNING

Michael Cronin, in his influential work *Globalization and Translation* (2003), introduced the concept of "Translation Ecology" to explore the role of translation in the control and survival of minority languages in the context of globalization. Although Cronin's primary focus was the context and environment in which translation operates, rather than ecological criticism in the literary or environmental sense, his ideas opened new theoretical avenues. Cronin's notion of "Translation Ecology" emphasized how translation practices impact linguistic diversity and the survival of smaller languages amid dominant global forces. Inspired by Cronin, Chinese scholars such as Hu Gengshen (2003, 2004, 2008) and Xu Jianzhong (2009) extended the idea of ecology into translation studies, shifting the focus toward applying ecological science to translation theory itself. Unlike Cronin, whose concerns were rooted in sociolinguistic environments, Hu Gengshen and Xu Jianzhong explored the translation process through a broader ecological framework. In parallel, scholars like Kalevi Kull and Peeter Torop (2003) examined "biotranslation," though their approach remained within the boundaries of zoological contexts, focusing on biological translations rather than human linguistic practices.

Hu Gengshen, however, developed a more comprehensive ecological model for translation. Drawing upon Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, he framed translation as a dynamic process of adaptation and selection. According to Gengshen, translation is "a process of adaptation and selection undertaken by translators according to the ecosystem of translation" (2004: 2). In this view, translators interact with various environmental factors — linguistic norms, cultural expectations, socio-political conditions — and adapt their strategies accordingly to ensure the survival and acceptance of the translated text. Expanding on this theoretical foundation, Gengshen introduced "Eco-translatology," a systematic framework describing the complex relationships within the translation ecosystem. Central to Eco-translatology are nine types of "triads" (13-15), with the most crucial being "environment," "life," and "survival." Here, "environment" signifies the conditions and context in which translation occurs, including cultural, social, and linguistic factors. "Life" refers to the vitality and adaptability of the texts involved — both Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) — within this environment. "Survival" addresses the reception and sustainability of translated texts and also the professional survival, quality of life, and future development of translators themselves. Gengshen's theory identifies three levels at which translation operates: linguistic, cultural, and communicative. By emphasizing these three interconnected dimensions, Eco-translatology offers a holistic view of translation as an adaptive activity responsive to multiple environmental pressures. It provides valuable insights into how translated texts are culturally and linguistically received within the target language community and how the socio-economic conditions of translators influence their choices and strategies. Thus, Eco-translatology significantly broadens the horizons of translation studies, introducing an ecological consciousness that resonates with both theoretical and practical concerns in the globalized world.

In a slight departure from Hu Gengshen's approach, Xu Jianzhong sought to construct a more formal theoretical framework that would integrate translation and ecology as a distinct academic discipline. In his work *Translation Ecology* (2009), Jianzhong conceptualizes translation as an ecological ecosystem — an ecological unit that exists within specific temporal and spatial coordinates. He emphasizes that, much like the material cycles and energy flows that characterize natural ecosystems, the biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) components of translation interact dynamically within their own ecosystem (2009: 4). To illuminate this interaction, Jianzhong draws upon several ecological concepts and principles traditionally associated with environmental science. For instance, he incorporates "Liebig's law of the minimum" — initially proposed by Karl Sprengel and popularized by Justus von Liebig — to illustrate how the weakest element in a translation ecosystem can determine its overall success or failure. He also refers to concepts like the Suess Effect, the Niche Theory, and the Food Chain to interpret the various dynamics influencing translation processes. Building on these ecological models, Jianzhong defines four sub-categories within the framework of "ecological translation." The first is the natural environment, which includes linguistic and cultural factors that influence translation practices. The second is the construction of translation within the social environment, comprising the political, economic, and historical forces that condition how translations are produced, distributed, and received. The third category pertains to the academic, ethical, and legal environments — the

norms, values, and regulatory structures that guide and restrict translation practices across different societies. The fourth sub-category addresses the internal environment of the translator, focusing on the translator's mental, emotional, and physical states, which inevitably impact their work.

III. SPROUTING

Although Jianzhong's "ecology of translation" and Gengshen's "eco-translatology" both draw extensively from ecological concepts to develop a theoretical foundation for "ecological translation" as a scholarly subject, it is important to note that their frameworks primarily focus on language, texts, cultural and social processes, translators, publishers, and readers, rather than exploring the biological relationship between nature and humanity in a literal sense. In their models, "ecology" functions more as a metaphorical lens to understand the complexity and interdependence within the translation process rather than a call for environmental activism through translation. Following this tradition, scholars like Wang Ning (2011) and Clive Scott (2015) also approached "ecology" abstractly and metaphorically, using ecological models to describe interrelations within texts and cultures without directly engaging with environmental issues. This metaphorical usage of ecology has largely persisted into recent decades, as seen in the works of Kobus Marais and Kalevi Kull (2016), Kobus Marais (2018), and Michael Cronin (2017), and others. Among these theorists, only Cronin has moved somewhat closer toward engaging with ecological issues more literally, yet he too operates primarily within the broader tradition that treats ecology as a conceptual model for complexity, diversity, and relationality in translation. Similarly, Federico Italiano's *Translation and Geography* (2016) employs the tools of geography and cartography to open new perspectives within translation studies. Although Italiano's work does not directly engage in ecological criticism, it indirectly touches on issues of environmental degradation and representation, thus offering a critical reflection on how landscapes and ecological spaces are depicted and mediated through translation. Overall, while ecological terminology and principles have been widely appropriated within translation studies, their application has often remained in the realm of metaphor rather than engaging deeply with environmental advocacy or critique.

Michael Cronin advances his theory of "Translation Ecology" by critically addressing the limitations in earlier models that inadequately integrated nature, humanity, and translation. In his seminal work *Green Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Anthropocene* (2017), Cronin reimagines the role and responsibilities of translation in an age defined by human-induced environmental crises. He opens by asserting that any serious or sustainable inquiry into translation must engage with the vulnerabilities and interdependencies of human and non-human life systems, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene (2017: 1). Cronin conceptualizes "green translation" along these lines, defining it as any form of translation thought or practice that consciously confronts the challenges posed by environmental degradation and climate change (2017: 2). Moving beyond the traditional anthropocentric frameworks that had historically dominated translation theory, he advocates for an expanded ecological perspective — one that acknowledges the symbolic, material, and communicative exchanges not only among humans but also between humans, non-humans, and the environment itself. This ecological reorientation, Cronin argues, is essential for both the survival and flourishing of all life forms. Furthermore, he calls for a radical shift in the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of translation studies (2017: 92), insisting that translation must actively contribute to addressing the pressing environmental issues of the twenty-first century. These include, but are not limited to, food security, climate justice, biodiversity conservation, water scarcity, energy transitions, language loss, eco-migration, and conflicts over natural resources. By framing translation as a critical agent in the broader discourse of ecological survival and justice, Cronin expands the theoretical horizons of translation studies and embeds it within the urgent ethical imperatives of the time.

The book *Translation and the Communication of Ecological Culture*, edited by Meng Ji (2020), can also be placed within the broader category of translation studies engaging with ecological themes. This collection showcases a range of approaches to environmental issues across diverse fields such as media, tourism, children's literature, advertising, and machine translation, with contributions from scholars like Silvia Bruti and Elena Manca (2020), Pilar León Araúz (2020), Maria Cristina Caimotto (2020), Sofia Malamatidou (2020), and Meng Ji herself (2020). These studies explore how environmental concerns intersect with various systems — the translation system, text system, cognitive system, and social environment — thereby extending the field's engagement with ecological questions into new domains. However, despite representing a significant expansion of environmental perspectives within translation studies, these works largely focus on the technical, discursive, and communicative dimensions of ecological topics rather than directly addressing environmental degradation or actively promoting environmental sustainability. As Meiou Zhao and Jiyong Geng (2024: 38) point out, such studies, though important, cannot be classified as "environmental-translation

studies" in the true sense. They observe that for translation studies to be genuinely environmental, it must discuss ecological issues and must also be oriented toward environmental advocacy and sustainability, thus bridging the gap between academic analysis and ecological activism.

Zhao and Geng (2024) categorize existing studies in the field of environmental translation into two distinct approaches: metaphorical ecology and nature-related ecology, based on their interpretation of the concept of "environment." Metaphorical ecology, according to Zhao and Geng, applies ecological principles metaphorically to explore the relationships and systems within human domains such as culture, language, and society. In this approach, ecological terms and concepts serve as analogies to describe the complexity and interconnections of various human systems, including social structures, communication networks, and cultural interactions. Nature-related ecology, in contrast, takes a more direct approach, focusing on environmental concerns by examining the tangible interactions between human actions, language, nature, and the broader world. This approach places a strong emphasis on the role of translation in environmentalism and in communicating ecological issues, advocating for translations that directly engage with the pressing environmental challenges humanity faces. They also argue that most existing studies in this field lean heavily toward the metaphorical ecology approach, where the focus is often on linguistic and cultural systems rather than on tangible ecological concerns. They note that there is a significant gap in research that directly addresses environmental issues and supports environmental sustainability through translation. To fill this gap, they propose a new approach called "Ecocritical Translation Studies," which integrates the systematic principles of ecocriticism into translation studies. This approach offers a robust interdisciplinary and cross-cultural framework for translation, positioning translation as a tool to address environmental issues in the context of the current global ecological crises. Ecocriticism, as a theory, helps to examine how translation can be a medium for reflecting, critiquing, and communicating environmental discourses across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Zhao and Geng acknowledge the potential of translation to mediate ecological discussions and also to play an active role in promoting environmental awareness and fostering cross-cultural dialogue on environmental challenges, thus advancing the role of translation in the global ecological discourse.

The first significant attempt to redefine the role of translation within environmental discourse from an ecocritical perspective was made by Daniela Cato and Bruce Allen (2014). They explored how the "translation process" functions not just as a linguistic or cultural act, but as one that is deeply interwoven with the ecological, cultural, and social dimensions of the source and target texts. Cato and Allen argue that an ecocritical translation should not merely replicate the content of the source text; instead, it should contribute to fostering ecological knowledge and stimulate new ways of thinking and writing. This view expands the role of translation beyond its traditional function, placing it in the context of broader environmental discourse. In a similar vein, Nüzhet B Aksoy (2020) describes how the "Cultural Turn" in translation studies has paved the way for new ways of understanding the intersection between translation and ecocriticism. From an ecocritical perspective, literary translation is seen as a site where, depending on the cultural and contextual environment, the environmental concerns embedded in the source text can either be amplified or suppressed. This highlights the crucial role of the translator in mediating ecological narratives and ensuring that the environmental themes in the original text are preserved or adapted for the target audience.

Guillermo Badenes and Josefina Coisson (2015) further emphasize the interdisciplinary potential of combining ecocriticism with translation studies. They argue that this integration not only enriches the theoretical frameworks of both fields but also offers practical strategies for using translation as a tool to engage with and address environmental challenges. They stress the transformative potential of ecotranslation in promoting environmental consciousness by disseminating environmental concerns across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Shao and Geng (2024) build on this by outlining three distinct approaches to understanding the relationship between translation and ecology. First, they examine how the human-nature relationship is reflected within the translation process itself. Second, they explore the ecological values embedded in the source texts, specifically how these texts engage with environmental issues and how these themes are preserved, altered, or suppressed in the translation process. Lastly, they focus on the impact of language and culture on the broader cultural discourse surrounding environmental issues.

While these studies contribute to the growing field of ecotranslation, Shao and Geng note that research on the human-nature relationship in translation is still in its early stages. Badenes and Coisson (2015) acknowledge that one of the main challenges in this field is the lack of a standardized and universally accepted terminology to define the specific studies within ecotranslation. Despite the varied and sometimes contradictory terminology used by different theorists, they propose their concept of "Ecocritical Translation Studies" as a way forward. However, they also recognize that efforts to unify and standardize the field have not yet been fully realized, pointing to the need for further scholarly work in this area.

IV. CONCLUSION

Theorists and scholars emphasize the potential of green translation, which interconnects the relationships between the environment, literature, and humanity, opening new avenues for applicability, debate, and innovative schools of thought. Thinkers explain that eco-criticism is not merely a literary tool but a philosophy of existence. According to this perspective, without eco-criticism, no meaningful analysis of life or creative work can occur. This view highlights that, just as a writer inherently acknowledges the necessity of thinking ecologically, Cronin (2017) also argues that translators who approach a text without considering environmental issues are challenging the existing social and ecological system. In this framework, translation and translators are not isolated from the world but are seen as integral parts of a vast and interconnected material reality. As Stibbe (2015) states, translators are “a complex and integral part of a vast and living material world.” This notion encapsulates the idea that all elements—writers, translators, nature, and readers—are intrinsically linked, transcending their individual boundaries and becoming unified in the face of the biological environment. The ecological reality is thus one of interconnectedness, where each participant in the translation process, from the writer to the reader, shares a common engagement with the environment. This view encourages a more holistic approach to translation, wherein the translator not only transfers meaning but also reflects on the broader ecological and environmental implications of the text.

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