



Culture, Language And Translation: A Translator's Dilemma

Dr. Karthika V.K.

Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, VIT-AP University, Amaravati

Abstract

Translation is defined as the communication of meaning embedded in a source language text through the medium of a target language text. When it comes to existence, the target language text also is perceived as original as the source text. However, the cultural and certain linguistic specificities of the source language text are not easily transferred or translated into the target language. Lack of linguistic equivalents is one problem. Another major issue is that certain cultural notions in the source language may be absent in the target language. This posits great challenge to the translators. In this paper, I have documented the challenges that I faced while translating a feminist short story from Malayalam to English. The paper discusses the points where I had to make translation a process of trans-creation in order to convey the meaning of the source language text. The challenges in terms of finding linguistic equivalents as well as the equivalents for specific cultural notations are described in the paper. This paper also attempts to document how these challenges could have been better overcome in this particular context.

Keywords: translation, feminism, short story, trans-creation, culture

Introduction

Translation enables knowledge transfer across languages. The knowledge available in a source language is restricted to people who are literate in that particular language. Across cultures, across languages there is a wealth of knowledge which may not be always accessible to people who cannot read and understand those languages. Therefore, the specific knowledge located within the boundaries of one language and culture gets transmitted to another language or other languages which may be culturally remote in time and space. The source language text is translated into a target language or many target languages by translators who try to create a translation which is ideally accurate, natural and communicative. The context, genre and cultural semiotics posit problems for the translators. When it comes to literary translations, the aesthetic quality of the text needs to be protected. Each text is produced in a particular cultural context and will have a lot of complexities in terms of semantics, semiotics and aesthetic aspects of the texts.

Translator's Dilemma



When it comes to literary translation, the translators encounter many issues as they have to fulfil the meaning making task as accurately as possible but at the same time without sacrificing the aesthetic sense embedded in that particular literary piece. The genre itself creates problems for the translators. For example, when a poem is translated from the source language it may not be possible for the translators to do justice to the rhythmic pattern of the source text. They may have to give up rhythm to meaning because communicating the meaning is more important than attempting to follow particular patterns of rhythm. Figures of speech which add beauty to the poetry in many cases will be highly untranslatable. Sometimes, when the translators attempts to do justice to the source text by attempting literal translations, the spontaneity and genuineness of the source text may not get transferred.

The most common problem that a translator may face is the absence of exact equivalents in the target language. At the lexical level, not having the exact word in the target language may lead the translators to circumlocution and providing lengthy explanations. This becomes pertinent when it comes to translating culture specific context. I remember how one of my friends translated “pennukaanal”(literal meaning in Malayalam being “seeing the girl” but the actual meaning being a man seeing girl to see if she is suitable for him to marry) as “bride seeing ceremony”. It is difficult to describe the cultural connotations of a particular concept with an exact equivalent word or phrase in the target language. There are no hard and fast rules to resolve the issues that may surge up while translating a text. Translation to a great extent is an idiosyncratic effort in which solutions to the problems also depend on the individual translators. During this process, many a time they have to trans-create meaning to make it coherent and cognizable to the readers in Target language. Translators thus endeavour to make the translated text as an independent entity rather than a mere word to word translation of the source text.

Translating the Malayalam story ‘BhinnaSamkhya’(The Fractional Number)

Being a novice in the field of translation, I translated a Malayalam short story titled ‘BhinnaSamkhya’ into English. This is one of the noted stories written by one of the modern feminist writers Gracey. The story was about the frustrations a working woman had to go through while balancing professional and personal realms of her life. However, this story points towards the aloofness and emptiness that she undergoes in her marital life. The lack of romance and love in her life frustrates her and she finally loses her strength to the cold indifference that her husband shows towards her. However, being unable to walk out of the house like Ibsen’s Nora or like Sarah Joseph’s woman character, Gracey’s protagonist finds a bizarre way to take vengeance on her family and on herself. It is clear from the story that the lack of “room of one’s own” is the frustrating factor along with the craving for the absent love in a marital relationship. When “she” the protagonist is asked by her daughter to explain “bhinnasamkhya” (the fractional number), being frustrated with her husband’s attitude to her,



she locks herself inside the room and hangs herself. She makes the loop and puts her head inside and by touching her head tells her daughter that it is amsam(numerator) and touching her body says that it is chedham(the denominator). The story ends when she kicks off the stool.

Challenges Encountered

Translating the title itself was a challenging task. Bhinnasamkhya's English equivalent is 'the fractional number'. However, in the story the female protagonist herself is the "bhinnasamkhya". Bhinnam also means "to be different". So the female protagonist considers herself as the different number. It also means that she is the one who thinks differently and behaves differently. The play of meaning with this single expression bhinnasamkhya is something that cannot be exactly rendered in a translation into English. Similarly, the Malayalam words for numerator and denominator such as amsam and chedham respectively have different significance in the context of the story. Outside the arena of mathematics, amsam also refers to "a tiny bit" or "a minute portion". Chedham, similarly, refers to "something that is cut off". When the word chedham is used in Malayalam there are a lot of connotations associated with that. The image of pain, sharpness of a sword or any other such weapons with which the amputation happens get recalled when one listens to the word chedham. This also brings in the memories of war or battles. In the story, in the domestic front the female protagonist is a different individual who is alienated from everybody else around. Therefore, she is a different kind of number which does not belong to the series of cardinal numbers. In the end when she commits suicide, the way she points at her head as amsam and her body as chedham also refers to the notion of her head or her thinking faculty being distinct and her body being the portion that is cut off. There are sexual connotations to this imagery too which was highly impossible to capture in the English translation.

Certain cultural notions such as equating peacock feather with romance, love, desire and dreams was something difficult to communicate through English. The image of a peacock feather in the Indian context has associations with Krishna. Peacock feather is a symbol that represents romance and the colours of love in Malayalam literature. But this essence was very difficult to be conveyed within the text of the translation. Therefore I relayed on comparing love and desire with the colours of peacock feather.

Another issue was the difficulty in translating her memories related to their physical proximity. The literal translation of a statement which means "he enjoyed the breast milk of my maternal affection" has multiple layers of suggestions. It refers to the various roles that she played in her husband's life but also it refers to the sexual intimacy and fantasies they had in the early years of their marital life. As translating this statement in a literal sense would have destroyed the actual meaning and poignancy of the text, I had to omit that part and rewrite as



“...That curiosity of a child who was in search of the lost colours of that peacock feather, the warmth of finding a mother’s affection, the sweetness of that unconditional love”.

Here the expression “sweetness of that unconditional love” was the only possible way for me as a translator to communicate the actual intent of the writer. To preserve the meaning of the text as such and in order to avoid any violation of the semantic functions of the text, I had to compromise on conveying the exact literal meaning. Thus, when it comes to this part translation has actually become trans-creation where I stepped in as a writer-translator and made changes to the source text linguistic expressions.

Conclusions

There may be a plethora of theories available nationally and internationally. However, no single theory of translation can ever offer a holistic solution for the issues encountered by translators. When the translators attempt to negotiate the cultural specificities embedded in the source text, the translators themselves become the authors and translations become trans-creations. In order to resolve issues of equivalents, one way usually taken up by translators is to provide a glossary. In my translation I have used a glossary. I also made use of footnotes which at the outset may look like a distraction. However, for reader to comprehend the meaning providing a footnote and glossary were the only effective ways left to me as a translator. The other portions where I claimed that I trans-created could not have been presented in any other manner. When to translate and where to trans-create are the decisions that any translators may have to take depending on the gravity of challenges that they encounter.

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