

**Intricacies Involved in the Translation of Poetry:  
Glimpses from the Works of Bharathidasan**

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**Bharathidasan (1891-1964)**

Courtesy: <https://www.inmemoryglobal.com/remembrance/2016/01/bharathidasan/>

**1. Introduction**

Poetry is notorious for its quality of untranslatability. Some are of the view that poetry has the inherent quality of being lost when translated and some others think that poetry is often amenable to

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translation. It can be stated that some poems by their very nature have an in-built resistance to translation. It is fairly obvious that such poems cannot be rendered into any other language. In some cases the difficulty may be posed by the strong rhyme and rhythm in the poem. A strictly personal or language-based poem allows no translation and often requires no translation. Where there is transcending element, where poetry tries to heighten our perception of experiences both important and trivial, there is scope for translation. But even the translation of such poems can create any number of problems for the translator.

Though no known language is without poetry and though the conventions governing the language of poetry are likewise familiar to the speakers of all the languages, it is quite difficult to reproduce any of these peculiarities into another language.

In the source language system, phenomena such as alliteration, rhyme, metre, etc. may have a particular value position. As language systems differ from one another very widely it cannot be said that if poetic features are reproduced superficially in an identical manner in two languages, their value position will be similar. In a vast majority of cases it may become totally different phenomenon.

The translation of metaphors, proverbs, idioms and phrases also pose problems to translators as the equivalents are difficult to find. The customs and conventions expressed in language differ from those in another language and so the element of culture and convention expressed in poetry is often a major impediment in translation.

With this background we are going to see the intricacies involved in the translation of poetry taking certain translated works of Bharathidasan.

## **2. Intricacies Involved in the Translation of Bharathidasan's Works**

The intricacies involved in the translation of Bharathidasan's works can be listed under the following headings:

1. The Problem of Transferring Linguistic Elements
2. The Problem of Transferring Cultural Elements

3. The Problem of Transferring Aesthetic Elements
4. The Problem of Transferring the Emotional Elements
5. The Problem of Transferring the Personal Touch
6. The Problem of Being Faithful to the Original

## 2.1. Problem of Transferring Linguistic Elements

Here the phrase 'linguistic untranslatability' is used in a wider sense which includes all the formal poetic features.

### 2.1.1. Problem of Transferring the Formal Structure

There cannot be any doubt that the genesis of a poem is different from that of a translation. But, when we compare the original poems of Bharathidasan and their translation, the most striking difference is the change in the shape, the appearance and the aesthetics of the visual form of letters and the emotional experience associated with them. This is something which cannot be helped because during translation source language graphology and consequently source language phonology are inevitably replaced by target language graphology and target language phonology respectively. But even the number of lines are mostly increased in the translation. For example, the poem entitled in Tamil as *peNkuzhandtai taalaaTTu* 'lullaby for female child' which has 28 lines has been rendered into English by Murugan (1994: 31-31A) by 46 lines. Thus, a change has occurred in the length and the form of writing and this certainly the first visual impact that the poem makes upon the reader. Even the number of stanzas can vary.

Sometimes a translator may resort to addition or reconstruction of information not given in the source text, thus deviating from the original. The following translated passage of Thangappa will exemplify this statement.

Tamil

vaanaviitiiyil vandtu tirindtu  
 tennagk kiiRRup ponnuunjal aaTic  
 coolaiyininRu caalaiyil meeyndtu

vaanum maNNundtan vacattiR koNTaaL!

English

Sweeping past the clouds in sweet sunshine  
She roams about the sky at will,  
Swings on the swaying coconut fronds  
Frisks and gambols in the woods  
And picks up grains by the roadside  
Heaven and earth belong to her

In the source language system, phenomena such as alliteration, rhyme, meter, etc. may have a particular value position. As language systems differ from one another very widely, it cannot be said that if poetic features are reproduced superficially in an identical manner in two languages, their value position will be similar. In a vast majority of cases it may become totally different phenomenon. The following poem will exemplify the above point.

paar paar (Murugan, 1994:179-180)

ponniLang kaalaiyil  
puutta cuTark katirpaar!  
in iLa veenilil  
inpa malarcciyaip paar!

Do Look at (them)

Look at the tender rays of the sun glittering  
That mark the early morn's golden hye!  
Look at the spectacle of joyous bloom around  
That mark the lovely pre-summer days!

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:1 January 2018

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Intricacies Involved in the Translation of Poetry: Glimpses from the Works of Bharathidasan

452

### 2.1.2. Problem of Word-to-word Rendering

Word-to-word translation, though is effective in certain cases, should be done with great caution. Sometimes a translator may resort to word-to-word translation without understanding the idiomatic meaning conveyed by the concerned phrase or compound. The following passage illustrates the above mentioned statement.

Tamil

kizhakkup peN viTTeRinda  
kiLicciRaip parutip pandtu

English

The parrot winged ball  
of Phoebes cast by  
the woman of the East

*kiLicciRai* means "gold resembling the parrot's wing in colour; one of four kinds of gold". The translator fails here by his wrong interpretation of the exocentric compound.

### 2.2. Problem of Transferring Cultural Elements

Cultural difference cause problem in identifying translational equivalents. If source poetry puts its weight more on the cultural and social background in which it is written, its translated version may not convey the message properly if the target language belongs to a different cultural and social background. The following translated passage will exemplify this statement.

Tamil

puuriyil orundaaL ndaanak,  
puuteevar enanaTakkum

aariyan oruvan tanRan  
akalvizhi muukkai muuTi  
ndeeril varutal kaNTaar  
ndeerpaTum koolattiRkuk  
koorinaar;

English

One day Nanak saw in Puri  
One Aryan with closed eyes and covered nose,  
Walking towards him as the God of the Earth  
Why in such a pose he should appear, he asked,

### 2.3. Problem of Transferring Aesthetic Elements

As beauty cannot be measured by common parameters, transferring esthetic sense across languages is problematic. In the following passage quoted from Prameswaran's translated version of Bharathidasan's *azhakin cirippu*, the aesthetic sense found in the original is lost in the translation due to the selection of words, their arrangements and style.

Tamil

iruLin pakalaaTai iravaaTai  
viNmutal maN varaikkum  
viyakkum un meeni tanaik  
kaNNilee kaaNpeen: ndiiyoo  
aTikkaTi uTaiyil maaRRam  
paNNuvaay iruLee unRan  
pakal uTai tangkaccelai  
veNpaTTil iraac ceelaimeel  
veelaippaa Tenna colveen!

English

Admire I your body  
Spreading from earth to sky  
Alter you your apparel  
So often O darkness!  
Gold saree your diurnal  
Dress is; O what filigree  
Work on the white silk on  
Your nocturnal saree!

The following translation of Murugan (1994:173-174) can also be quoted here to exemplify the above-mentioned point about transferring of aesthetic elements.

viNmiinkaL

vaanattu ndiilap paTTaaTai- atil  
vaari iRaitta mutttukkaL!  
meeni cilirttiTum kaNTaal - avai  
viN miinkaL enRu colluvaarkaL!

miin enRu colluvateenoo? - avai  
minniTum kaaraNam taanool!  
ndiirndilai miinkaL nam miinkaL - avai  
ndiilavaanak kaTal miinkaL!

The Star

The blue-hued silken spread in the sky  
And the pearls strewn all over!

A spectacle thrilling it is  
And they go by the name 'stars'!

Why are they called stars?  
Is it because they sparkle and shine?  
They are 'fishes' of the blue-hued ocean of the sky.

### 2.3. Problem of Transferring Emotional Elements

The difference between a poem and its translation starts right from the stage of conception. A poet writes about a particular thing or experience because his deep perception of it has strongly moved him to give it a verbal expression. Thus, it is his own emotional, imaginative or intellectual apprehension of facts and experiences that a poet tries to express. In the case of a translation the cause for its genesis is the existing poem. This original work stimulates the translator so much that he experiences a deep affinity for the work which in turn prompts him to create a version of that experience in his own language. But he is not a person who merely collects the meaning contained in the original poem's linguistic and textual structure or who merely interprets the text's surface signs. Yet the most frequent criticism against translation is that it lacks the spontaneity and power of the original work as the translator is trying to render the original poet's views faithfully. It is true, that no man can think another man's thoughts or feel another man's feelings exactly and in totality, but this is not what is expected of a translator either. The basic qualification that a good translator should meet is that he should be able to peruse a literary work in such a way that he can make a sensible reading of it. The poetry translation becomes atrocious when it is done by precision maniacs totally devoid of imagination. But when it is undertaken by person whose interpretation of the poem clothes it in the beauty and the freshness of creativity once again it can stand as a fairly good substitute for the original. The criteria which are essential for a poet should be processed by the translator of poetry as well. There is no point in evaluating a translation as second best simply because it is a translation.

### 2.4. Problem of Transferring Personal Touch

A strictly personal or language-based poem allows no translation and often requires no translation.



'inapperyar een' enRu piRanenaik keeTTaal  
manattil enakkuc colloNaa makizhcciyaam.  
'ndaantaan tiraaviTan enRu ndavilkaiyil  
teentaan ndaavelaam! vaantaan enpukazh!  
'munnaaL' ennum panneTun kaalattin  
ucciyil 'tiraaviTan' oLicey kinRaan.

## 2.. Problem of Being Faithful to the Original

Thus, if one renders a poem in Tamil into English he makes some compromise with the language structure which will be revealed in the translated version by loss of information, over generalization, under generalization, loss of tempo and emotional impact, etc.

### Conclusion

Perfection cannot be there in the poetry that we read, it is there only in the poet's vision. Actual poetry is that which is waiting to be born. Poetry loses much of its charm when the poet externalizes or translates into words the inner melody and the uniqueness of his vision. The vision of the original poem will be paradoxical as the translator has to externalize someone else's vision in some other medium into his own medium.

Terrada says that an author dies as soon as he produces his work and that there are no significant, but only signifiers. If we accept him then there is no question of reproducing a original by resorting to translation, but only interpreting what has been told in another language. There could not be a translation of original, but only transcreations. The following questions will be irreverent if we accept Terrada and consider every translation as a new creation rather than rendering the original into another language.

1. Whether translation should be free from the original or faithful to the original?
2. Whether translation is an art or science, or a skill?
3. Whether translation should read like the original or like a translation?
4. Whether translation should be in a foreign language or in the native language?
5. Whether translation is a product of inspiration or will-power?

6. Whether translation should retain the original's time, culture and other properties or reflect the time, style, culture, etc. of his own?
7. Whether we can make evaluation of translation in the absence of any model for assessing translation quality?

As the question of evaluation of the quality of translation does not arise as every translated work has to be considered as a new creation, we can only make a typological analysis of the translated works rather than evaluating the quality of it.

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