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PRACTICING LITERARY TRANSLATION
SYMPOSIUM ROUND SEVEN

V. V. B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

**PRACTICING LITERARY TRANSLATION
A SYMPOSIUM BY MAIL – ROUND SEVEN**

Moderator: V. V. B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

I came across a very interesting article in MOUNTAIN PATH, a publication from Sri Ramana Ashram, Tiruvannamalai, Tamilnadu, India: From Vak-Vichara to Atma-Vichara where Rustom P Mody wrote, I quote:

“Benjamin Lee Whorf brought to our attention *the fallacy of the assumption of translatability*. His work can be summarized in two principles:

“Linguistic Relativity states that we create the world according to the lines ingrained in our language.

“Linguistic Determinism states that our language conditions our thinking.” This explains the rationale behind the earlier “ban” on translating a scriptural text like *The Koran*.”

Mody states and rightly at the very beginning of his essay: “Clearly the demand and the attempt to translate rest on the assumption of readability.” This is absolutely true. A friend in Malaysia asked me to find someone who could translate *Sanatkumara Tantra*. Listening to the sacred text, I realized it is absolutely untranslatable because every word in it is part of a *vaidic* ritual drawing from a (now) very complex intellectual/spiritual culture. Even the text is not scriptural, holy or firmly culture ingrained, poses insurmountable obstacles to clear which in an attempt to aid the understanding of the text in a target language needs long notes and explanations which interfere with the readability for the general, lay reader.

This needs to be stated to the enthusiasts of Literary Translation, who may think that all texts can be translated.

K. Parameswaran

Deviance and Translation

Translation is an activity that has traditionally been viewed as the replacement of an SL text with an equivalent TL text. Hitherto, a majority of discussions about translations have centered on the degree of equivalence that is achieved between the two texts.

Discourse Analysis (DA) is a new tool that tries to understand and explain the dynamics of meaning generation in a language. Since the replacement of one text with an

equivalent text involves the transmission of meaning from one language to another, the inputs from DA can throw a new light on the process of translation.

DA sees meaning as a function of the intersection between text and context. Here, text refers to any material coming up for translation. It can be anything from a word to a whole novel. The relevant point here is that text becomes meaningful only in a context. Contexts, at the same time, are basically cultural constructs that are embedded in each particular language. They can be transmitted to any other context only along with the context obtaining in the SL. This means that contexts are to a large extent untranslatable. It is in this context that the term "deviance" is derived. Since contexts are basically untranslatable, cultural constructs have to be translated to parallel contexts in the TL. This necessarily involves a deviation from the SL.

Such deviance is not owing to the inadequacy of the translator or the deficiency of the translation. Rather, they are pointers to the uniqueness of each specific language. Transliteration, borrowing etc are some of the techniques used to overcome such deviance. The success or inadequacy of such exercises throws light on the central quality of deviance in the process of translation. In other words, cultural constructs regarding contexts and the deviance they entail are marks of the dynamism of various languages.

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R. Vijayaraghavan

What Translation Means to me

I have done translations for the Karnataka Sahitya Academy's journal – Anikethana over the past 3-4 years. Those are all from the English texts whether they are from Pakistan, Iran, Turkey or Ekelof, Chomsky, Lorca or someone else. It has always been easier when the source text for the translation I have depended for my work does not employ the energy of the images and metaphors of the culture in which the work has sprung in to action. It has appeared before me as a corollary to growing pan global attitudes that are bulldozing the sensibilities of the native cultures. Where it is other way round the translator in me has struggled to find, sometimes, a single apt word.

I will give you an example:

My friend Lakshmipathi Kolar has written a wonderful poem named *Maya uyyale*. I thought that the poem should be read by many from different languages and the vehicle is, as you predict, English. I was unable to find a single word that aptly signified the meanings the word *Maya-uyyale* has. With the word *Maya -uyyale* repeated in the poem several times, I abandoned the idea of translation though I got a definition somewhere* because long footnotes spoil the essence.

I have done two major single poet translations. The first one is selected poems of Gunnar Ekelof from English to Kannada (Kannada Book Authority, Bangalore-2004) and the next

one is Allama's enigmatic vacanas from Kannada to English (CVG Books, Bangalore-2005 to be released on 6th Feb 2005). In both the cases the translation work has not been an easy one. Then, I have liked them so much. They did not leave me. I have also published a translation, which included Rilke, Kahlil Gibran, Lao Tse and Taoist poems (CVG Publications, Bangalore 2004). In this case Rilke posed me problems but not Kahlil Gibran or Lao Tse or Taoist poems. After publishing the book I have asked myself the question why it was so. It seems I have found an answer in a question whether the incorporeal relationship I have with the east (of the west) has prepared me to read their poetry in a different angle.

In the process of translation another crisis has always stared at our face. While creating his or her poem a *bhasha* poet will subconsciously address the work to his or her people. There will not be an effort to make the meaning explicit, narrative simple and straight to be reachable. The reader in the same *bhasha* will never get tired in finding the meaning. This can be the case with identical or similar cultures. A translation in such a case, even if it uses English as a vehicle does not entirely depend upon the language of the source text for translation because it will be communicating with the original directly as well as through the vehicle. A poem written in Kannada translated to Telugu or Malayalam or Tamil with English as vehicle may read like the one written in their own language. Even the reader may experience the music of the original text if the English source is a good translation. At the same time the English translation may not give up that easily to readers from an alien culture. Many a time the music in the poem becomes an object placed at an unattainable height. We will lose a lot. Even Auden has said, while translating Ekelof, he has abandoned the rhythm employed by him (Ekelof).

In that case a question arises: Should we have two kinds of translations, one for the readers from the same or similar culture and the other for those who have no or little knowledge of the source – Original -text culture? Then we have to seek answer to another question- lot of foot notes which half equip the reader at the cost of appreciation of poetry, like the example of *Maya-uyyale*. The word probably will ask the reader to frequently visit the following footnote, with all embarrassments it embodies:

****ma ya (mä“y...) n. Hinduism. 1. The power of a god or demon to transform a concept into an element of the sensible world. 2. The transitory, manifold appearance of the sensible world, which obscures the undifferentiated spiritual reality from which it originates; the illusory appearance of the sensible world. [Sanskrit m³y³.]***

(American Heritage Dictionary)

In the absence of editors of translation, a not so equipped translator will escape unscathed and in the result the work leaves much to be desired. The solution is the translator should himself revisit the source as well as the target several times from as many angles. With abundant language tools now available in English, we can draw a precise conclusion as to the import. But what gives advantage is an acquaintance with the cultural contexts of the source and the resemblance with the target.

I had an occasion to translate about ten pages from a book in Malayalam language. The English spellings did not provide me the required tool to put the nouns in Kannada. I listed all such words and sought the help of Malayalam speaking girls who used to pass before my house on the way to their college. It revealed that at least five words sounded unusually different. Thus there is always a scope for improvisation.

A poet seeking privileges from choosing subject from epics and myths is a common phenomenon. Some may appear to have escaped from them but still remain deeply rooted in it. However the escape is not easily achieved. This compels the translator (and the reader) to learn what the poet has tried to transcend and why. A work may not deserve called to be good if it has just avoided compared to the one that has transcended.

After attending various seminars where I had an occasion to listen to unknown languages I am now convinced that a translator has to be interested in not just the music of the target language, but also of the source. The difficulty with having the English as the vehicle-language of interpretation- is that in the process of passing through the pan-globalised English language, the language of all target texts that depend upon the Passed-through-English for translation read alike, same way as that English.

In some of the cases as in the case of Auden, the translators do take a lot of pain to contain the music and the rhythm of the source in the target language. They ultimately announce the death of the rhythm, but wherever the translator has been assiduous, the language to an extent yields to translation, either similarly or in the rhythm of the target language representing the same mood.

It so happened once that I heard the voice of Nazim Hikmet over the internet just before translating his famous poem Jiokonda and Sia u for Kannada Aniketana, a journal of Karnataka Sahitya Academy. In fact the music that occupies the sub stratum of the poem in translation is greatly due to the listening of his recitation (of some other poem though).

The music of Kannada may not be essentially the music of Jiokonda. But it is certainly not arid. HSR and I in a seminar shared a view that a poem that has lost its music or a poem whose music is not heard of becomes a faceless pan global modern free verse.

Let me now share the advantage of translator being located in the same and similar culture. I have brought the Adivasi songs, love poems of Shahid Suhravardi, a poet from Pakistan (from English again), Gunnar Ekelof and others like Rilke. It has appeared to me that the translation from all except Rilke had been easier.

I did know from the biography of Gunnar Ekelof that he had studied Persian and had learnt music. The Diwan over the Prince of Emgion and Fatima's tale are set in a Persian background. Thus it was not very difficult for me to translate the text, but what was important was to distill the condition of body and mind of the blinded man who was once a prince. He appeared to have been nearer from the point of view of culture, but his condition was not.

Ekelof is not a poet easy to understand. His virtue at the same time is not complexity of poetry, but the morality as virtue transcending the whole of his poetry. He has not left the protagonist in the dark world. He has illuminated it as if he has heard Allama Prabhu say

*There is the lamp
There is the wick
Yet the lamp does not glow
Where should be the light
Without the oil*

In fact keeping the lamp burning was the challenge for me; I believe I could.

We now arrive at another part of the question of pan globalization of American or American-like thought. Here we have to answer the question: what would be awaiting the other poetry- the ones that do not conform to the norm unwritten but widely practiced? I use the word poetry to mean all literatures.

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Balraj Komal

Translation as an activity – and a cultural activity at that – intended to widen the area of human understanding and communication with reference to general and specific information, knowledge as also creative presentation in prose and poetry. The basic requirement relevant to good translation is that the translator must have a thorough knowledge of both the source language and the target language. If any references are a part of the source language text, the translator has to take recourse to authoritative referential sources for verification between rendering them into the target language.

When we handle prose for translation. We have a variety of prose writing before us: prose that presents scientific and technological information: prose that presents general information; prose that presents human experience in fiction, in narrative and descriptive modes and at places metaphorical modes. Prose meant for translating and transferring scientific and technological information into target language has to take care to ensure correctness of terminology, statistical data and communicability without any demonstrative stylistic flourish. Prose in the target language in translation of fiction has got to have felicity and smooth flow in descriptive and narrative areas of the text. While handling metaphorical aspects of prose fiction, interpretative options arising out of the specific areas will have to be kept in mind before settling down on final choice. In translation of prose drama, it has to be ensured that the personae retain their individual identities in the prose they use in their conversation.

There are some problems of translation, which are specific to translation of poetry. If the purpose is to provide an introduction of poetry of the source language to a prospective reader in the target language, the practical workable way out would be to present in the target language prose rendering or paraphrasing a poem or poems in the volume, in the

manner the Penguins do. The intended reader may either be satisfied with the rendering or if sufficiently inspired and his curiosity aroused, he may like to find ways to communicate with the original. Transfer of rhythmic patterns formal or otherwise and the imagery metaphoric content is a formidable task but hardly avoidable. The translator has to have the skill to match over-statements and under-statements of involved languages. A translation is no substitute for the original but perhaps the only means to “reach” the original. The passage from literal prose rendering to transcreational adventure is full of hazards. Eventually it is the skilful ingenuity and creative versatility of the translators that transcend all barriers and lend grace and authenticity to the translation.

Balraj Komal (1928) is retired Senior Officer in the Directorate of Education. He has dozens of publications of his own apart from his translations. He visited several countries like Norway, Jordan, Germany, Denmark, Israel, China and Japan. He organized several workshops and contributed to the organization of such by reputed agencies and institutions.

Dr Bhargavi Rao

Cultural Proximity: A translators’ Advantage

Translations are never discussed here in India, mainly because French, German or Russian languages are really foreign to us. But whenever a work from Indian language is translated into English, all critics, theorists and non-theorists judging the quality pounce on its limitations through a magnifying lens, more so when the translator is an Indian! However, when we read Chekov, Tolstoy, Maxmueller or Moliere, we seldom worry about the relationship of the English version to the original work. However much we have accepted English as our second language, we sound like PushpaT of Ezeikel’s poem.

English is still the language of a different culture, and behaves like a new bridegroom (in Indian context)! It is not the case when translation is from one Indian language to another. They get merged like milk and water and the critic has a tough time playing the mythical *hamsa* of *ksheera neera nyaya*. There could be a few problems when the languages are distanced geographically (for example from Gujarathi to Malayalam and Rajasthani to Kannada) but when two languages both source and the target languages are from the same culture, the job of the translator is made easy.

The translator need not sit biting nails and rush to the dictionary every ten minutes. When it has been accepted that translation is not only important but also necessary in a multilingual country like India, there is no point in pondering over the problems of translations. Cultural proximity is a big advantage for translators. It is rewarding for them to look for this when they choose their work.

Dr Bharagavi Rao retired as a Professor of English from Osmania University, Hyderabad. She is a creative writer, choreographer and Literary Translator. She received the Best Translator’s Award from Sahitya Akademi in several years ago.

Aju Mukhopadhyaya

Views and Experiences on Literary Translations

When I translated my short stories from Bengali to English, I took immense liberty even to change some areas of the story to make it ultimately a creation different from the original. But while translating others like Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, a classical writer, it was really a walk on the razor's edge to keep the writer in tact, at the same time to render the best of him in English. I was quite happy when I was able to render the folk rhymes contained in his story in English.

It is true that translating poems is more difficult than translating prose. That is why there has been a raging controversy about writing Japanese Haiku in three lines with 17 syllables (5+7+5) in English. Some hold the view that the rhythm in original cannot be maintained in the same number of syllables in English. What is required is the essence of Haiku, they hold. But some others feel that Haiku can be written in English in the same length as in Japanese. I have written Haiku of both types. There is more joy in translating a poem keeping the rhythmic patten and style of the language rendered. I have translated and published a small book in Bengali containing some of Sri Aurobindo's short poems in English.

As a writer I feel kind of unrest and throb when something is conceived and feel a pang until the thing is born but this is absent when translating other's works. In that case I feel detached though more responsible to both the author and the reader. Translation is called by some as transcreation but I feel more joy and urge in creating an original piece rather than translating though I know that translation has become essential in modern world for expansion of our literary horizon.

Aju Mukhopadhyay is a bilingual poet and writer. He has 13 books in Bengli and eight books in English, which include biographies, fiction, essays, poems and some translations. Large numbers of his articles and features have appeared in newspapers. He is animal and nature lover and a conservationist.

Summing up by the moderator Dr.V.V.B. Rama Rao

Dr Parameswaran's is a timely revelation for those who are not acquainted with the concept. It is a comparatively new approach, which took us by a storm in mid-sixties of the last century when we were at the Central Institute of English. I make haste to quote a text book definition of DA, Discourse Analysis. In 1983 in a textbook M. Stubbs' defined it as a) concerned with language *use* beyond the boundaries of a sentence/utterance, (b) concerned with the interrelationships between language and society and (c) as concerned with the interactive or dialogic properties of everyday communication.

This concept enables us to look at translated literary texts with a good measure of empathy. The 'situatedness', or, in simple terms, the context is very important for the 'discourse' a sustained piece of writing or speech.

Vijayaraghavan's experiences, I thought, are worth reproducing in their entirety. Luckily our Editor does not place any severe restraints on space. The writer's experiences are useful to all practicing translators and I have this precise objective – exchanging notes in the various minute details.

Balraj Komal the veteran has organized workshops and guided many on the road to success in this practice and we all have to agree with him that no translation could ever be a 'perfect' substitute to the original. We are aware of this each in each in his or his own way and this is reason why I quoted the statement that Literary Translation, we could call it hereafter rendering a 'sacred sin'.

Bhargavi Rao has a valid point: renderings raise great expectations when the inherent impossibilities are not apparent to the reader/ assessor. Facing criticism, not always fair or objective, is not very pleasant. Forgive we have to for 'they know not what they underrate'. Let us remind ourselves that when it comes our assessing/reviewing a rendering we should have our hearts in the right place. I came across a recent translation of a 15th-16th century Telugu classic which has been 'modernized'. I did not find it worthwhile to raise my voice: that went into print and got bouquets! Perhaps I was not very generous. Perhaps that man was lucky to get away with what he had done. Many did hold the view I did but then there may be more who think the "other" person who actually 'produced' something was an achiever.

Ahu Mukhopadhyay expressed the feeling that he does not have the joy of original writing while rendering. True: original writing is spontaneous and has a 'kick' (sorry for the expression) but then. All said and done, rendering is effecting deliberately a literal *parakayapravesa*.

A word of thanks to all: now I see participants are opening up. Thanks again!

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