

## Prolegomena to the Practice of Literary Translation

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### Abstract

This paper proposes that literary translation is not a formidable task, but it requires a very special effort. The paper points out that universally accepted theories of literary translation do not exist. The paper proposes a roadmap for the serious study of literary translation as a genre of literature. Importance of several concepts found and used in Sanskrit literature such as *sahridaya*, *rishirina* and *parakaya pravesa* is discussed in relation to the translation of modern Indian literature in Indian languages.

**Key words:** universal theory of translation, *sahridaya*, *rishirina*, *parakaya pravesa*

### Towards Emotive Cohesion

Literature has an extra-ordinary capacity to promote emotive cohesion. India is an extensive country with numerous languages and their variations of sub-languages, dialects. Down the centuries the country has been producing literary artifacts. For cultural integration, among many other things, cohesion of understanding and appreciating our regional language writing is necessary and hence the activity of literary translation needs to be cultivated and encouraged. If at least one student from every institution of higher learning takes to literary translation, we would be able to take the world by storm displaying our, literary imaginative, creative achievements.

### Not a formidable task but a very special effort is necessary

Literary Translation is not a formidable task as it has been made reading works of theoreticians and academicians (on theories) who are not always translators themselves. Literary Translation is a unique field of activity. It is distinct from translating an ordinary text, say of an Instruction manual or an informative piece of writing. In fact Translation is an activity with

diverse objectives and for the full fulfillment of specific objectives task-specific strategies have to be evolved.

### **Valid and always universally acceptable theories of literary translation do not exist**

It is futile waiting for a valid theory of literary translation, universally acceptable and universally followed with absolute obedience. The best way for one aspiring to be practitioner is to roll up his/her sleeves and sit down to work. With enthusiasm half the battle is won and with patience and with perseverance the other half. After all one has to perfect one's own theory for one's own self to follow it with tenacity. Applied Linguistics with its concepts of equivalence, nature of language etc has been an ever-expanding science involving rigor and discipline. Theoreticians make much of "losses" in translation but in literary translation compensation and the gains for the target language are never given their due emphasis. A study of Applied Linguistics does not by itself supply the student with conclusions immediately applicable to policy. This does in no way purport to denigrate the study of Applied Linguistics. The study of science surely helps the practitioner to draw his own inferences while performing his task ahead. There is no readily available theory There is not much evidence that all practitioners of literary translation have undergone rigorous training in the science of Applied Linguistics.

A study of translated texts alongside the originals would help the practitioner equip himself with his own insights. The best school, which teaches translation, is the work of literary texts on the table/ outputs of the practitioners themselves. The prime requirement for a practitioner of this art is enthusiasm for the literary text, deep understanding and love of the language into which he wishes to import the literary excellence/achievement in the original to the extent possible. Knowing the nature of the two, the source and the target languages and a flair for literary nuances in both would be helpful.

No translation is permanent when it comes to a literary text. A translation can be in currency only till the appearance of a new/better rendering. Literary Translation is undertaken as a labor of love: it is in itself the reward. A prize or an award is fortuitous and none ever undertook the task with the 'reward' in mind. A literary translator volunteers to undertake the task, quite prepared for self-effacement. There may be any number of renderings of a given literary text, each justified and each having a right to exist as any other rendering, for each practitioner might have given a focus to certain nuances/ suggestions etc.

Practitioners also differ in the degrees of freedom each has taken with the original text, for each has his own way of presentation of what he construes to the essence. The individual practitioner has to decide the limits of freedom and accordingly cultivate fidelity to the original. The most important thing is that the rendering has to be reader friendly. It is the practitioner who contributes to the glory of the writer in another language.

### **Literary Translation a Genre of Literature - A Roadmap for Serious Study**

Of Literary Criticism and Literature, the one that came first was literature. Literature has several functions and creative literature takes many forms called genres. Each genre has slightly different norms for criticism. Literary Translation has come to assume great importance in the context of translation being recognised as a genre. The need for expanding horizons of understanding between various language communities demands literary translation into and from many languages.

Literary translation evolved independent of formal training as an academic discipline. All renowned translators went to literary texts in all languages to import or export literary works in a different language. They did so without any formal training and without the basis of any theory of translation. The translators took the texts they adored and translated them. They forged ahead rendering unto their readers what they thought was worthwhile in a language they thought best, to the best of their ability. A new genre “Literature in Translation” came into being. Some theory or principles are becoming necessary to evaluate translated texts. Critiques and review articles on translation have come for individual works even without a theory as such. In the context of the much needed but unusual spurt in translation activity, it is essential for translators to have something like a set of guiding principles, if not a full-fledged theory in itself. In the absence of a universally valid and accepted theory, translators necessarily follow their own strategies in practice. Though there is nothing like a theory which is immediately applicable to policy, ever since literary translation came to be important in the 20<sup>th</sup> century context of promoting international understanding, literary translations have been getting reviewed. It would be possible to deduce some principles, which ultimately may yield a complete theory. But it should be borne in mind the theory has to envisage principles to suit each set of source language and target language texts. This article is to make a viable beginning of such an attempt.

### **Suggested Plan of work – (indicative and not thorough or exhaustive)**

The following is the nature of books to be consulted: Available books on translation theory in English, collections of essays on literary translation by known translators. Books on Applied Linguistics are helpful for some consultation.

Helpful also are our own treatises on aesthetics and literature.

### **Some Norms of criticism prevalent for Literary Translation - A tentative list**

- a) Faithfulness to the Source Text
- b) Degree of Freedom taken
- c) Possible justification for deviation

### **Different genres of original works and their translation into the same or another genre**

- a) novel into novel
- b) story into story
- c) poem into poem
- d) poem into prose or free verse
- e) prose play into prose play
- f) poetic drama into poetic drama etc

### **Ultimate tests for Translated Texts**

Readability

Easy flow

Retaining the flavour of the Original

Does the translated text read like an original or a translation?

Study of the techniques and strategies followed in the translation

The basic questions before embarking on the practice are:

- a) Which is the text being translated genre-wise: prose, poetry, fiction or drama?
- b) What is the purpose of translation: transferring information. from one language to another or carrying a literary text from one language to another
- c) Is it translating instructions etc. from a manual in one language into another?
- d) What is the type of text in terms of its original composition, contemporary, classical medieval or ancient?

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e) Who is the target reader, the elite, neo-literate, the general public or students with a specific purpose?

f) Is the translation in the same genre or into another?

Here is another table to show various categories of translation:

Nature of the Source Text	Target Reader	Intended use / utility
Informative	Ordinary reader	Passing on information
Instructional	Worker	Using a manual / Set of instructions
Language study	Student	Imparting language skills
Literary Text	Literature lover	Literary appreciation - joy

Here we are concerned with literary translation and it is our aim to take as much of the beauty and significance of the source text into the target language text. After carefully considering the answers to the questions raised above we have to make a number of choices. In matters of style, diction, expression etc what is most important is appropriateness, aptness, ('naturalness') and felicity in the target language.

A study and an analysis of social markers, markers of cultural levels, registers, and technical words, need to be carried into the target language with utmost caution. The translator could be faulted for taking too much for granted from his reader or, in the other extreme, underestimating the reader. Pedagogic translations may be an exception to this. Too many explanations and too many footnotes distract. And then the most important thing is the stance of the translator. The ideal thing is to be inviting, enthusing and encouraging the reader to get the feel of the original text. It is essential to be reader-friendly and the fidelity to the target reader is obviously a little more important than fidelity to the original text.

The validity of a translated text does not depend totally on one to one correspondence between the original and the translated texts. Some parts, fragments may be safely omitted, some may have be excised in extra-ordinary situations. It is useful to retain some words of the original, especially terms of kinship, items of dress, words of address, interjections, expletives, items of food, clothing etc. not only in unrelated but even in cognate receptor languages. The receptor

language stands to gain some loans from the original, when they eventually become familiar and popular. Translated texts can contribute to the growth of the receptor language in terms of lexis.

Another table would be of practical value to decide specifically before undertaking translation:

a) Category of translation: Informative, Instructional or Literary

Target reader: Lay person, User of a Manual, Student/Learner, Literary enthusiast or general public.

b) Source language (Original text):

c) Genre: prose, short story, novel, poem etc.

d) Period of writing: ancient, medieval, modern or contemporary

e) Target language (language into which text is being translated)

Having decided that we are interested in literary translation, we have to study the translated literary texts first to understand the strategy of the translator in terms of translating various features like style, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, structure, idiom, expressive devices and so on. It may take some more time for the public and more importantly scholars and educationalists to widely realise the need for translations of literary texts from one *bhasha* literature into another.

### **Different choices and ensuring coherence and harmony**

#### **Scrutiny of the selection of**

- a) style
- b) social level
- c) cultural variety
- d) register
- e) technical terms / jargon
- f) regional variety / dialect etc

### **Degrees of Translation-validity**

- a) over translation
- b) under translation
- c) mistranslation

d) ability or inability to convey cultural nuances

### **Different Kinds of Translations**

Translations vary according to the purpose and according to the target reader the translator has to have in mind. This point needs to be taken into consideration for evaluating a translated work. For example, a translated text is prescribed for study in an educational programme for learning a language or for understanding the literary beauty of a text. This translation demands extensive notes not only on lexical, semantic, syntactic items but also on tropes and other expressive devices. This needs a pedagogic translation, though the term has not gained any currency yet.

### **Evaluating an interactive translation**

This is a kind of translation where a translator sits with the writer of the original and goes on with his task where the writer can suggest modifications etc. This ensures credibility and authenticity but this cannot always happen. Even here a critic may find places where there might be inadequacies, especially when the writer does not know the receptor language well enough.

### **Evaluating Collective Translation**

Collective Translation is resorted to by institutions like Sahitya Akademi when on a priority basis a text needs to be translated. A number of translators are assembled at a place where the work before them is discussed first and later assigned in bits to every one individually. The work of each is discussed in the group, commented upon and guided for fresh drafts. Fresh drafts are discussed again for finalisation and sent to press. Some kind of uniformity and adherence to rules is ensured.

The object is to convey the beauty in the very best way into the receptor language. Even this needs critical evaluation and a basis for that which may be particularly relevant for that kind of work.

If putting an idea into language is one kind of ‘translation’ activity, translating that into another language is another, more difficult, process. In the first instance it is less complex but the translator poses several problems. In creative writing there is a special significance intended in the use of vocabulary and expressive devices. Aesthetic considerations play a very important role. This leads to complex problems very frequently. There are so many ways in which a literary text, which

is a piece of creative- writing, can be rendered into another language. This is not the case in factual, informative writing where the purpose is comparatively narrow and limited. Poetry, for example is imaginative writing, which, usually, lends itself to a wide variety of interpretations. The translator needs to be very clever trying to make his translation as variously suggestive and as variedly communicative as the writer of the original text.

*Sahridaya* is essential for the appreciation of a literary text and it is no less a prime requirement for that appreciation in the translator. . For the translator it is an essential prerequisite, for he or she has to put across the seen/imagined/felt beauty into the target language. The translator-transcreators who have rendered the texts, for example, into Telugu from Sanskrit centuries ago were great imaginative artists themselves. They have minds and hearts that could get into that creative frenzy to come up with a version that had been their own in many ways. Their capacity to envision and intuit has earned for them laurels, which they never thought would accrue to them at all. They must have felt their work a way of redeeming what they believed was *rishirina*.

It is the humble attempt of the translator to bring at least a part of the glory of the text before a reader who has no access to the original. For this he tries to accomplish a figurative *parakaya pravesa*, metaphorically getting into the original writer's body. Sometimes it is an adventure, sometimes more hazardous than rewarding, sometimes an expedition into uncharted waters, which may simply devour him or drive him away into the perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn. It is for this reason that we should go to translations with a measure of forgiveness for lapses.

The translator intends his work for the sufficiently interested general reader who does not know the language of the original text. He is a provider of lift facility to those at the door ready to embark. Translation in its Latin cognate, we are told, has the travel meaning. The translator assumes that a reader comes prepared to put some effort to gain something. The reader is assumed to be interested in getting exposure to a new language and culture. The reader approaches the translated text determined to hear the proxy voice of the original writer. He knows full well that he is reading a translation and is prepared to accept it as the next best. If the translation is satisfying, it is forgotten that it is the other's voice and there is willing suspension of disbelief in deeming it as the author's voice. The reader gets the joy of accessing the author. The translator, then, is successful. It may be possible that he has some prior knowledge or exposure, which perhaps would



make things easier for him. The facilitator does work to the best of his satisfaction, to the best of his knowledge and judgment.

The reader is drawn to a translated work to read it avidly knowing that it is the next best to the original inaccessible to him, to get a fair measure of something of its tone, quality, for comparative study etc. He doesn't go there for serious evaluation of the quality of translation or critical judgment there on. In short, translations are not frequently read to pick holes. Even the one who knows both languages has to have his heart in the right place before passing value judgments solely based on isolated slips. This doesn't imply that the translator could hash it out and make the thing shoddy. This only enhances his onus to give his best. Criticism of translated texts should do some good trying to set things that have gone askew straight. A critic of translated text should resist the temptation of "fishing in a barrel", a phrase used by L.E. Sissman, the American reviewer (Sissman L.E. is America's most respected literary critic and a poet. 'How to be a Literary Critic' an article from *Indian Book Chronicle*, Jaipur, Vol.1. No.10, May 16, 1976: 145-46 Courtesy: *The Atlantic Monthly*.) To declare that more damage than good is done by any given translation would only reveal a rash judgment. If the original writer has not done any damage himself by his writing, the translator cannot do any fresh damage.

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