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Faithfulness and Adequacy in Translation
A Case Study of the Translation of a Poem
Written by Bharathiar

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The Question of Adequacy and Faithfulness

The minds of great people of a particular language, minds of great people that shape human life, have been made available to all, who can read and hear in all parts of the world, because of the art of translation. Translation is an art of approximation. Fine translations aim at conveying faithfully the heart and mind of the author without changing the original author's meaning, intention, idea and purpose. As Thirumalai points out (<http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2003/languageinscience.html#chapter7>),

Since the user is not generally aware of all the details of the original information (if he was aware, he might not bother to seek the information in the translated version except for urgent and special reasons such as in the case of giving references to his readers to indicate the accessibility of the materials referred to in their language), he is generally unable to judge, in full, the adequacy of the translated version as opposed to its original. Assessment of adequacy is generally made better by a team of persons who have, severally or collectively, competence in the subject, and the source and the target languages.

Translators' Preparation

Since adequacy and faithfulness are essential features of a good translation, it becomes necessary that translators prepare themselves with knowledge and understanding that would unravel the original author's meaning, intention, idea and purpose. This demand is all the more stringent when it comes to translating poetry with potent intercultural and cross-religious references, etc. If this is not done, then, the translator would only misrepresent the poem and the poet in their translation.

Fairness in Translation

According to Webster, the term "translate" means "to express in another language, while systematically retaining the original sense." Here, one must note that translations that do not retain "the original sense" of the author do more damage than good because, apart from being unfair to the authors who

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are misrepresented, wrong translations are also unfair to people who trust the translators and read these translations.

Good translations are truthful vehicles of the thoughts of original writers, whereas false translations corrupt the works of the original writers making the original authors subservient to the translator's intent and/or inadequate preparation.

Translations from Indian Languages

Most of the translations of the works of poets in Indian languages is done not by the authors themselves but by other interested and often well-meaning translators. Most of the translations of the poets of eminence in various Indian languages have been undertaken in the past only after the death of these poets. As such, original authors' views on the translations of their works are not readily available. If they were alive, and if they were given a chance to review the translations before these were published, they would have made corrections appropriate to their original intent.

This condition makes it all the more imperative that translators take abundant care to identify the meaning and sense of the poems they translate, doing their best to bring out the original intent and meaning, etc.

Our Focus – Translation of a Poem Written by Bharathiar

In this paper, we analyze the translation of a poem by Bharathiar by a well-known translator, Prema Nandakumar, to illustrate the requirements that we consider as important while translating a poem into English from Indian languages.

We must emphasize that translation is a great art and the translated piece is often an approximation of the original. And so, no single translation of a piece of poetry may be considered perfect in all aspects comparing it to the original. Errors are common, but we all need to strive to avoid manifest errors of interpretation.

Bharathiar in Modern Indian Literature

To place him in the Indian context and modern history, we note that Bharathiar, a great modern Tamil poet, was a contemporary of B.G. Tilak. He was present in the Surat Congress of 1907 and was a staunch supporter of the so-called Extremists group. He had to move to Pondicherry, then a French territory, in order to avoid imprisonment in the hands of the British rulers. His poem on the rise and success of Bolshevik Revolution or the Great October Revolution in Russia is considered a great masterpiece and as the earliest support for October Revolution in India, by the leaders and workers of the Communist Movement in India. Indian National Congress considers him to be *the* Congress Poet of par excellence.

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Dravidian Movements leaders had some reservations in the past but officially he is also adopted as a great modern Tamil poet with revolutionary ideas since his poems stand against suppression of women, religious minorities, and lower strata of the society. Bharathiar was heavily influenced also by the spiritual developments within modern Hinduism during India's Freedom Struggle against the British rule. He was not acceptable to the Congress leadership in Madras Presidency while he was alive because of his revolutionary ideas and some eccentric behavior. However, for all time to come, Bharathiar's poetry and prose works will be considered a great contribution to Modern Tamil. He used formal verses, free verse, introduced prose-poems and made several innovations that would last for a long time.

So, a translator of his poems is burdened with many responsibilities and is also blessed with a lot of information and research on Bharathiar's works.

A Poem on Mary Magdalene of the Bible

One of his poems, *Ye:su Kristu* (Jesus Christ) is set in somewhat traditional verse format, with 3 stanzas. It takes up the story of Mary Magdalene. Bharathiar writes in his preface to the poem, "One may translate these words to read, that Mary Magdalene, a wayward woman came to Jesus and remorsefully asked of him to save her from her evil ways and their consequences. Jesus showed her grace. According to Christ's legend, Mary Magdalene saw with her own eyes this Jesus as he was raised from the dead on the third day of his burial to be glorified. This episode is explained by this poem here."

With these words of introduction, Bharathiar presents his insightful poem on Jesus Christ. Bharathiar correctly portrays the Biblical position of the event of crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, Bharathiar makes it a point to mention in the preface, "as per Christian *puranam*" (referring to the Bible).

So, it becomes incumbent upon any reader or a translator that their understanding be based on the narrative found in the Bible and not swerves from it. The poet himself has called for this when he makes a reference to the story from the Bible.

However, the translator makes several changes, manifestly against the intent and wording of the original author.

Theological Mix Up and Linguistic Misinterpretation

Of these, we would like to take up only two features: theological mix-up and linguistic misinterpretation.

As already pointed out, translation from any language to another language is not an easy task. Difficulties become compounded when inter-cultural and cross-religious information is to be translated.

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While Bharathiar clearly talks about resurrection, the translator mixes *resurrection* with *ascension* of Jesus Christ which happens on a later day. The context is crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the place is Calvary where Jesus was crucified. It is the sight of Jesus on the Cross that impacts Mary Magdalene.

Linguistic Misinterpretation

The translator translates the second line in the first stanza (**ezhundu uyirttananaaL oru mu:nRil**) as ‘ascended in three days’. If this is due to a misunderstanding of the Biblical position or due to a misunderstanding of the Tamil word, “uyirttananaa,” clarity could have been achieved by a reference to the Bible in both English and Tamil versions. “Rose from the dead” is a common translation in English and this “rise” is aptly presented with the Tamil word “ezhundu.” Theological mix up results because the Biblical position clearly makes resurrection and ascension as two different events.

While this example in itself presents the linguistic difficulty created by the translator, there is yet another line in which once again a theological mix up of serious proportions is caused through a wrong reading of a word. Lines 6 and 7 of the first stanza in Tamil are as follows:

te:var vantu namakkuT pukunte:
na:caminRi namai nittanka:ppa:r

The translator offers the translation for these lines as follows:

The gods will enter us
And guard us from all ills

The translator quickly translates the word *te:var* as “gods” which is appropriate in ordinary contexts as it could easily mean a plurality, “gods”. However, if this translation is correct, the finite verb should be *ka:ppar*, or *ka:pparkaL* (which does not sound poetic enough in this line), and not *ka:ppa:r* as given by Bharathiar. The finite verbal phrase is the key to the possible correct translation here. *ka:pp:ar* has the correct verbal ending for a singular person. If *ka:ppar* or *ka:ppa:rkaL* is used, then, the word *te:var* could be interpreted as a plural noun. So, *te:var* should have been interpreted as God, a singular entity.

Bharathiar’s Understanding of the Bible and the Word Play

Bharathiar appears to be very careful and adept at describing faithfully the original Biblical position while at the same time interpreting and contextualizing the message of Crucifixion for his largely Hindu audience.

In our opinion, Bharathiar also indirectly refers to the apparent peculiarity or grammatical anomaly adopted by Christians and the translators of the Bible into Tamil, which began nearly three hundred years ago, to refer to Jesus as te:van in singular non-honorific while endowing him with a honorific finite verb ending! Probably his poetic sensibility does not have room for apparent grammatical anomaly and sets it right by giving Jesus due respect by changing te:van to te:var, a honorific term. Christian theologians may interpret this deliberate anomaly differently, but this is not our focus in this article. In any case, the finite verb ka:ppa:r clearly indicates that the subject te:var refers to Jesus/God rather than to gods.

What Is Needed?

It is important for a translator to work from within the culture, theology and other assumptions of the source and then to bring it out in the target language. While something may be lost and something may be added or changed, such changes should not be against the original intent of the original author, especially when it is possible to identify the intent through linguistic structures.

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