

Rendering Domestic Gloss for Academic Philosophy: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

Academic Philosophy has become, since the later part of the bygone century the single donor of theories in divergent areas of study, be it social sciences, humanities or languages. It has become the fashion of the day to engage in theory shopping in Philosophy markets where items required for any theoretician is freely made available. But to enable academics to engage in effective theory shopping two things seem required: first global ideas in some sense need to be converted or translated to local requirements and, second, ideally there is a translation available of these theories in the local tongue. Both these requirements are very demanding. Contextualizing Western theories in Keralite living conditions without losing its essence itself is a Himalayan task, which anyhow I do not intend to address in this paper. Rather, I shall concentrate on the second equally challenging task, of providing a base for the translation of the contemporary Western philosophical thinking in Malayalam.

Before I involve myself in the said task, let me clarify two things. Of the two main streams of Western Philosophical thinking, Keralites seem to have some exposure to the Continental thinking, especially early existentialism, Neo Marxianism and so on. Therefore a kind of a glossary has been developed to engage those theories (though they are partial and spurious, to my mind), but no effort has been made to translate the major thought currents of analytic tradition. The obvious reason being that it is logical, argumentative and in some sense formal. The glossary we have in India to engage in logical reasoning is the ancient Nyaya glossary, which in some sense fail to convey the modern ideas of the West. Under these circumstances it becomes inevitable that we the academics working in this discipline make efforts to provide a glossary of analytical Philosophy which would enable contemporary

Malayalam literature to enhance its vistas and empower itself with rigorous logical analysis which in some sense has become foreign to Malayalam literature, probably due to its partial and one sided acknowledgement of continental theories, ignoring the vast areas of analytical philosophy. The paper aims at analyzing the problems involved in translations of philosophical literature in general and analytic philosophy in particular. I shall also surface the main reasons for the negligence of Western analytical thinking by elite intellectuals in Kerala. Following that I shall attempt to provide an analytical philosophy glossary in Malayalam.

Academic philosophy has become, since the second part of the bygone century, the single donor of theories of divergent areas of studies in the faculties of Social sciences, Humanities and Languages. It has become the fashion of the day to engage in theory shopping in philosophy markets as items required for every thinker of all tastes are freely made available here. But in order to enable the sibling disciplines to purchase theories from philosophy, to empower academics for effective theory shopping, there are two pre requirements: First, the theories available at the global market need to be socially translated to befit the local concerns and issues. Second, they need to be linguistically translated to the domestic language in which the people of the region converse and conceptualize. Needless to say these two are interrelated and are issues addressed together. If there is one thing common to both these requirements it is this that both are highly difficult to accomplish. Contextualizing Western philosophical theories in Keralite cultural and intellectual climate without losing much of their gravity and significance is indeed a herculean task, which anyhow I do not intend to address in this paper. Instead, I shall confine to the latter issue, equally challenging and touch upon the former wherever it gets intertwined with the latter. This is the task of providing a theoretical base for the possible translation of philosophical concepts / theories available at the global market especially that of the harder and more technical philosophy called the Analytic tradition.

Before I engage myself in the above said task, let me bring to the notice of the reader a clear shift that has taken place in the academic/intellectual/cultural horizon of the *Post modern Kerala*. I have consciously used the term *Post modern* here, to bring to the forefront the fact that while the majority of Indian states are yet to be modernized Kerala has stepped in to an era of post modernity. Since the commencement of this new era, Kerala's intellectual elite have shown affinity towards Continental Philosophy, especially to Existentialism, and Neo Marxism. As a result stray attempts were visible to constitute domestic glossary conducive to express ideas of these philosophies. This in turn has caused an unwelcoming result in the region; people who were confined to the regional language for information in Philosophy were left with the feeling that Continental thinking is all philosophy, and were sadly kept away from mainstream thinking in Philosophy, namely the Analytic Philosophy. Academics and intellectuals in Kerala alike chose to ignore the mainstream Philosophy running through the High way, and had encouraged the Continental thought, a by way product, intentionally creating a misconception among the people that the existentialist, structuralist and post modernist concerns exhaust Western philosophical thinking. This situation emerged from a twin reason, first the continental thinking addresses humanistic concerns, easily understandable even by laymen and directly address some of the fundamental questions of human existence, viz., status of the individual as *Being*, the status of the *other*, and the role of man in society. And what more, all these concerns, directly or indirectly promote and nurture the Marxian and Neo Marxian ideology that got deep rooted in Kerala's cultural landscape. Second, the Analytic tradition is quite abstract and is largely footed in formal logic, consisting more of technical philosophy, untamable by common men. To top up these difficulties, there is severe lack of vocabulary in the regional tongue Malayalam to express ideas available in that thought stream. Due to all these those who are confined to the regional language for acquiring knowledge will be grossly misled; being left with the false impression that Continental thinking is all philosophy available in the West.

In the past Philosophers have found an easy way out for this problem; they began borrowing technical philosophical terms from Sanskrit, substantiating their act by pointing out the fact that in India Sanskrit has been the single donor of technical terms to regional languages to enrich and empower them to handle academic topics. As a matter of fact, Malayalam as a regional language has been made to flourish by lavishly borrowing technical terms from Sanskrit, an act that has been undertaken by poets and literary figures of yester years of this land. But this easy way out has its own problems; first, it would be a dangerous act to just lift a term from a context and use it to represent an idea occurring in an alien culture. Those who have even a peripheral knowledge of Sanskrit would be aware of the fact that terms here have deeper relation with the ideology propagated within it. Also here the terms carry multiple meanings and therefore extracting a referential kind of semantics would be a difficult task¹. Let me illustrate this argument further: someone who wants to translate a contemporary epistemological theory into Malayalam may as well resort to classical Nyaya tradition, and attempt to borrow technical terms from there, but the terms available there, being intrinsically connected with the theory of knowledge available within it will not suit our purpose; for instance, Sanskrit vocabulary basket doesn't carry a term equivalent to justification (in the epistemic sense of the term); one would go wrong if she chooses to translate it as *pramanyata*, for the latter refers to an externalistic variety of *justification* while in the West the term *Justification* refers to an internalistic exercise.² Similar is the case with other traditions as well; the gloss available in the Classical Indian Philosophy might not raise to fulfill our expectations as they might not fit in rightly to the modern and postmodern notions propagated by the Western schools.

1. Issues in Translating Philosophical Discourses: An Overview

Philosophy too does not escape the embarrassment faced generally by the academic disciplines in their attempts to translate their discourses in the regional languages being confronted with

the problem of translating technical terms within the discipline. A retrospective analysis would reveal that the neglect towards translation and the translated status of these discourses are the reasons behind this. A general failure to take into account the differences introduced by the act of translation causes the major damage in such attempts. Philosophers were, down the history, found engaged in recreating concepts by interpreting domestic versions of foreign texts, but of the most part, these versions have been taken as transparent, unmediated by the domestic language and culture into which it is translated. For instance, Anglo American tradition conceives language as a transparent medium of communication, and idealized the transparency of the translated text. Philosophers assumed that transparency is an attainable idea provided the translator pay at most attention to the accuracy of the translation, aiming at a one to one correspondence with the foreign text. This in turn implies that we could chastise the translator for missing the foreign philosopher's intention for the full significance of the text, if the translation fails to mirror, as it were the original. In brief, translation exposes a fundamental idealism in philosophy, by claiming that it can convert the foreign concepts to the domestic language attending at the same time the different meanings and functions they come to possess in different cultural situations.

In order to analyze the merit / demerit of a translation I wish to adopt G.E.M Anscomb's English translation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigation*. When first published in 1953, the text was bilingual, with Anscomb's English version facing the German. The reviews that appeared all tacitly judged the translation in terms of its correspondents to the German text, by avoiding any reference to Anscomb's work at all. Devoting their reviews to the critical expositions of Wittgenstein's ideas, they quoted from the English version as if he wrote it, as if it were a simple communication of his intended meanings.³ Critical expositions of Anscomb's translation came quite late; but when they finally appeared, they continued to assume correspondence as the criterion of accuracy. Such an assumption would prove to be negligent towards other competing domestic interpretations of the text. To make Anscomb's version

of *Philosophical Investigation* visible we must avoid the assumption that language can ever simply express ideas without simultaneously destabilizing and reconstituting them. Any language use is prone to the unpredictable variation of the *remainder*, the force of linguistic forms outstrips any individual's controls and is capable of complicating intended meanings. Hence no English translation of *Philosophical Investigation* can ever simply communicate Wittgenstein's German text without restructuring, at least marginally, his philosophy as well.

Anscomb's translation is cast in a plane register of the standard dialect of English, but draws noticeably from colloquial usages, for example, the use of terms like *holiday*, and *queer* are fine instances of it, where, American English would have words like, *vacation*, and *strange*. Anscomb's choices can't be classified as errors in the sense of ignoring the meanings assigned to these words in current dictionaries, but should be marked as an attempt to communicate Wittgenstein's ideas even by mimicking his style of writing.⁴ Yet in the process the translation was over laid with a domestic *remainder*, allowing the text to remain irreducibly foreign even as it entered the domestic culture. As a reviewer wrote, "Each sentence is clear and almost colloquial but the cumulative effect of the sentences is peculiar."⁵ To sum up, any translation can only submit the foreign text to a domestic interpretation provided it simultaneously also undertakes a reconstruction of the text that answers to the needs of a particular interpretative occasion.

That the philosophical project of concept formation is fundamentally determined by its linguistics and social conditions get in fact proved by the *remainder* that we have been talking about in a translation. The *remainder* completely destroys the assumption delivered by modern academics, viz. the philosophical subject is an autonomous agent of reflection, trans cultural, trans social and trans linguistic.

It would be interesting to glance through some of the strategies employed in philosophical translation. It is a known fact

that, while translating philosophies of Western civilization, the *remainder* requires a twofold responsibility, both to the foreign text, and the domestic readers: the translator holds, in other words, a dual responsibility of maintaining a lexicographical equivalence to the foreign text on one hand, and also at the same time cautiously maintaining the foreignness of the text to the domestic readers. Often we fail to recognize the fact that a translation can be declared successful only when it signifies the linguistic and cultural differences. Motivated by an ethics of difference, a translated work seeks to inform the domestic readers of a foreign philosophy and initiate them into a new thinking through that work. Foreign concepts then brought to domestic discourse is expected to alter and influence the mode of thinking among the regional *intellegentia* and also change domestic institution by evoking a self-criticism, being stimulated by the new philosophies learned from the translated foreign works.

Yet another sense of responsibility that philosophical translating can shoulder is to follow *an ethics of sameness* and establish a domestic equivalence for foreign concepts/discourses, minimizing their differences with the native culture/ideology. In other words, despite the fact that a translation should aim at accurate rendering of the text, a translator should exhibit, ideally less regard for the foreign text than for its domestic strategies. To quote Anscomb incident once again, it was in fact her striking heterogeneous language that allowed her to preserve the eccentricity of Wittgenstein's philosophy, and also attracted the criticism and revisions of other domestic commentaries.

Translators of philosophical texts in English language have long shown an awareness of the significance of the *remainder*, of the irreducible difference caused by the translation. But this awareness and enthusiasm to maintain the difference was restrained by adhering to the Anglo-American preference for fluency, immediate intelligibility and the illusion of transparent communication. For instance, Benjamin Jowett, the famous Victorian translator of Plato has repeatedly reiterated that transparency is the virtue of a translated

work. And in order to secure transparency Jowett recommended the use of homogenous English style that relies mostly on current usage. He says: "...no word however expressive and exact should be employed which makes the reader stop to think, or unduly attracts attention by difficulty or peculiarity or disturbs the effect of the surrounding language".⁶ Due to this obsession with transparency and demand for correspondence, English translators of philosophy texts have not been attentive towards the domestic values of the remainder inscribes in the foreign texts.

These shortcomings of analytic translators get compensated by the Continental thinkers; Continental philosophers have motivated English translators to challenge the conventional discursive regime of transparency and experiments with the remainder. The experiments have often been successful in preserving the linguistic and cultural differences of the domestic space on the Anglo-American scene. Take for example, translations of Martin Heidegger's text: they have been particularly effective in developing new translation strategies and etymologies, not only because his neologisms and etymologies puns and grammatical shifts demand comparable inventiveness, but also because his text addresses translation as a philosophical problem, which takes a decisive role in contributing the meaning of concepts. The translations of Heidegger's works allowed his philosophy to increase the self-consciousness of his translators as well as inform their own philosophical research. Though Heidegger's essays had been translated into English during 1950s, as his type of thinking deviated so widely from the logical analysis prevailed in Anglo- American Philosophy, they remained alien to the English readers till deep into the 1970s. Since 1980s Continental philosophical traditions gained greater acceptance in Anglo-American Universities and leading American Thinkers like Richard Rorty openly supported and welcomed the continental streams of thinking to American Universities. It is to be noted that Heidegger's translators not only tampered the current usages of communication while delivering his concepts, but also practiced them through various discursive strategies. For all these they would have extracted motivation from Heidegger himself, who popularly

has said that our thinking must first be translated to the ancient experience of *Being* before being translated into any other language and this is to be achieved by abandoning modern pre suppositions that are anachronistic and antithetical to it.

Contemporary philosophers view that translation of philosophical texts can be improved if translators take a more experimental approach towards their work. A mere literary approach turns the philosophical translation into a minor literature within the literature of philosophy. On the contrary, an experimental translation creates a philosophical language that challenges the domestic hierarchy of philosophical languages; the translation that avoids stylistic innovation will have an insinuating impact on the domestic discipline, assimilating the foreign text to the standard and prevailing interpretation. The experimental translation alone can signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text by deterritorializing the major language and opening the institution to new concepts and discourses. By taking account of translation Philosophy doesn't come to an end, doesn't become poetry or history, but rather expands to embrace other kinds of thinking and writing.

II Rendering Malayalam gloss for Academic Philosophy: Hurdles and Possibilities

Having discussed the general concerns on translation in Philosophy, let us now look at the issues involved in providing Malayalam gloss for Philosophical theories. That there is a calculated move to undermine the Analytic tradition in Kerala has been well argued in the previous section. What remains to be seen is whether we need to consider a revision in this attitude? An emphatic yes is an answer from my side for the following reasons: first, Continental Philosophy has been so much overplayed here, and as a result the common man who does not have any material gain or academic agendas hidden up in his sleeves feels desolated and alienated to the thought currents propounded and discussed under its banner. These theories have had deep cultural origins totally unshared by

the Kerala community and little surprise that an average translator would find it hard to domesticate them. What more, if we go by the norms of Post Structuralists themselves, values/ideas aren't absolute in nature and therefore, values which are of high moral value for a particular cultural community may not be so in another.

The privileged position analytic school has when compared to its continental counterpart is this that the former happens to share its basic axioms with that of the contemporary scientific culture. In fact, the early analytic tradition initiated by Vienna Circle and Logical Positivism centered around the virtues of scientific method like certainty, objectivity, universality, precision etc. Epistemology which is closely allied with analytic philosophy is an imperative to all knowledge system as it provides tools for various knowledge enterprises undertaken by any discipline. Therefore, I shall address some of the issues involved in providing domestic glossary to knowledge analysis as a sample study that would depict the general nature of the hurdles as well as possibilities in translating philosophical texts / themes into domestic language. Traditionally knowledge has been defined as justified true belief. Here translating terms like belief, justification etc would raise significant problems. Belief is routinely translated using terms that represents specific psychological attitudes whereas, belief in knowledge analysis is used to mean epistemic acceptance. Similarly, justification too would create difficulties for the translators for, justification in the Indian context refers to externalistic justification while, in epistemology it carries an internalistic sense.

All these suggest that someone desirous of translating academic philosophy into a regional language domain will have to be proficient at least in three areas, domestic language into which the foreign text gets translated, the Western philosophical text, which is being translated and also Classical Indian Philosophy from where he will have to pick up gloss to represent foreign terms. In other words, the demands from the translator are huge: apart from a good exposure to Western Philosophy the translator should understand the

domestic culture and also the classical language Sanskrit, demands difficult to fulfill by majority of translators. And if someone is indeed capable to do that will not care to do it as the correspondence and transparency images still ruling the domain would refuse to render originality to translated works, a sad state of affairs, which urgently calls for revision.

NOTES

1. Pramana for instance, may refer to both the method of knowing as well as valid knowledge
2. In Internalistic theory of justification the agent has access to the evidence while, in externalism the proposition gets justified through some connection, either causal or nomological.
3. Fine examples of this can be seen in P.F.Strawson, "Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: Mind", vol 63.54, and Paul Feyerabend "Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations", Philosophical Review 64.3, 1955.
4. A Quinton, Political Philosophy, 1967, p.392
5. Hamilton 1954, p.117
6. Benjamin Jowett, Plato, The Dialogues of Plato, Vol 3 (The Republic, Timaeus, Critias), 1892, p.49.s

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