Are All Translations from Indian Languages into English "homogenized"? From the Translators' Perspective

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Abstract

There is an assumption made in certain quarters that points almost to a nexus between the publishers of translation who produce 'homogenized' English translations that narrativise the nation and the translators who end up in "eradicating multiplicities and destroying regional flavours". As a practising translator, I feel that it is possible to produce English translations that need not become 'homogenized' and those that strive hard to retain multiplicities and their unique Indian language (I refuse to call them 'regional') flavours. My paper reflects on some of the translations I have been involved with.

It is an ironic fact that we are all divided by the various languages we speak, while language per se is supposed to allow us to come together. It is equally ironic that in India we try to circumvent the problem of multiplicity of languages by having one or two languages as lingua franca, languages which are not spoken by even the largest majority. We have accepted Hindi as an official language and English as an associate official language out of an administrative necessity. However, it is not clear as to why or how when it comes to literature, the rich multiplicity of Indian languages should be re-presented even to other Indian languages mainly through Hindi or English. The motto of Sahitya Akademi that prides itself of being the world's largest publishing house is: Indian literature is one though written in many languages. Both in the many years preceding the political independence and the years after independence, we seem to have been compelled to take the political slogan of 'Unity in Diversity' to its logical extreme, in that it is extended to other areas including the representation of the rich

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linguistic multiplicity of our country. We are so caught up in translating the diversity of our languages first and foremost into the official languages of our country that it follows that we find it convenient to render any future translations even between let us say two languages within the same state via Hindi or English. To me these are the chief reasons for the homogenization of translations into Hindi or English. With English, we have the additional problem of contending with its wider reach as a global language. The wider a language's reach, the more homogenized it may have to become for its accessibility. Also, the wider the reach of a language, the greater its power to command other languages. The infusion of English words into all Indian languages is just an instance of such power. A similar process is at work between the standard variety of any language and its so-called dialects.

What are the implications of the power relations between Indian languages and English to the process and product of translations from Indian languages into English? When literary texts are translated from an Indian language into English, they seem to come so much under the pressure to conform to the forces of homogenization that they lose their linguistic and cultural specificities. The absurd consequences of such a process would be that an English translation of a Telugu text and an English translation of an Assamese text will read more or less similar in terms of the variety of English they choose to write themselves into. I am not denying that such a thing is happening to a great extent. I am also not denying the role of the publisher for whom the texts' readability in English and its wider reach and acceptance are very important. Nor am I discounting in this act of homogenizing the role of the translator whose anxiety is to get across a significant text in her/his language to a wider audience. But I am not sure whether there is a nexus between the translators and the publishers. As a translator I would like to believe that translators are aware of these forces of homogenization and try their best to resist them. I would like to illustrate it with a few examples of translations from Telugu to English.

In the poem titled "Avval Kalma", Yakoob, a Telugu Muslim poet, gives expression to the predicament of backward class Hindu converts into Islam:

> We don't know that we are supposed to call
> our mothers ammijan whom we address as oyamma
> and our fathers as abbu, abbajan or pappa—
> How do we know—even our ayyalu haven't taught us
> any of this.
> Haveli, char deewar, quilwat, purdah—
> How do we who live in bamboo palaces know all this?
> My grandfather used to tell me that namaz meant only
> to kneel down and get up,
> but I never learnt the language of Bismillah hir Rahman,
> Allaho Akbar, jihad.
>
> Festivals for us only mean rice with pickle.
> Biryani, talavs, pulavs, sheer kurmas are all for you.
> Sherwanis, roomitopis, and saleemshahi shoes
>
> Your clothes perfumed with attar,
> Whereas, we decorated with airy tattered clothes.
> (Yakoob 2000:ll. 16-28)

A poem replete with such pure Urdu as well as Telugized expressions would have normally resulted in an English translation that would have used many italicized words and footnotes running into several pages. However, the long poem in our English translation does not use any italicization, and has only eight footnotes in all.

Or, consider the use of a variation of an idiomatic expression like 'Chandruniko Noolupogu' by Prasada Murthy, a Telugu poet. This expression succinctly brings out the inadequacy the poet-narrator feels about saying anything meaningful concerning his grandfather, a master weaver, from whom he has learnt a great deal, not to weave cloth, as he has moved away from his traditional profession, but to weave poems. When Uma and I translated this poem into English, we decided to substitute this expression by 'A Token Piece for Thatha' in the title

where the expression appears in its variation. Nor had we given a footnote to it at the end of the poem. We must have felt it is quite cumbersome not only to explain the original idiom in Telugu, but also its variation to our readers. We have chosen the easier option of inventing the nearest equivalent to suggest that the poem is just a 'token' appreciation of his regard for his grandfather and satisfied ourselves that the 'piece' would stand both for the cloth piece suggested in the Telugu expression as well as the 'piece' standing for the poem. But shouldn't we have used the Telugu expression, 'Thathako Noolupogu', which itself is a variation of another Telugu expression, 'Chandruniko Noolupogu', and given appropriate footnotes, thus retaining the culturally loaded expression? Prasada Murthy says:

> Thatha, my thatha!
> Weaver of zaree sarees of silver moonlight
> A carrier all your life of sackfuls of pain
> You are a padmashali you are the skillful one
> You are the primeval artist
> Who folded a six and a half yard poem into a match box.
>
> (Murthy 2000:ll. 4-9)

The poem is thus both a celebration of his grandfather's skill as well as a statement of his own inability at the same time to do something similar and different that is sure to remind an English reader of Seamus Heaney's "Digging".

Denchanala Srinivas, a Dalit-Bahujan poet ends his poem, "Svadehalu" ("My Own Bodies") in the following manner:

> *Mankena* flower is red *donda* fruit is red tender milky lips
> are red
> sweetheart's cheek is red heart's song is red earth's
> womb is red sunrise is

> red sunset is red fire is red acid running through a human being is red the
> poem writing me is red the pyre I burn on is red the unmoving foundation
> even after the walls are collapsed is red the sharpness of a knife even after the handle is lost is red though the humans have lost vigour the redness is
> not lost redness is *kirpan* that's the only truth you son of a dog in a country where I was annihilated for calling you a total lie why do you still worship before unfurling the red flag
>
> (Srinivas 2000:ll. 30-39)

How does one work out the repetition of words and the rhythm of a source text such as the above, except by way of a literal translation?

Could homogenization in a translation from an Indian language into English lead to its being sanitized? I feel like asking this question when I look at descriptions such as the following from a powerful feminist writer like Volga:

> The same task three days a week. I find my yoni disgusting. In my childhood, my amma and ammamma would hide it very carefully. Even I had not seen it except during my bath. I knew nothing about it. Nobody told me about it. My amma and ammamma told me in many ways that I should not touch and not allow anybody else to touch it or even see it. I only knew that it was "shame, shame." But I used to like it. Especially when I saw boys naked I used to feel at peace with myself for being a girl and not having a horrible tail hanging between my legs like that. It was as if I had escaped a great disaster. I used to pity boys. I used to feel sorry that the poor things had to put up with that sickening tail dangling between their legs all their lives. Beyond that

> I knew nothing about these organs. Nor did I know their names. Once Radharani said she knew their names and would tell me, but for some reason she didn't.
>
> (Volga 2001:187)

I have a strong feeling that a bold and direct passage like this is sure to be sanitized in an Indian English translation. But how could we not keep closely to the source, especially when Volga takes on Freud and reverses his concept of 'penis envy' here[1]. This is a significant contribution to feminist criticism by Volga that needs to be taken to a wider audience.

In the past, we had 'domesticated' translations from foreign languages into Indian languages, where we successfully transplanted them culturally on our soil giving them a local habitation and a name. Even the names of characters and places were changed to become part of our culture. I would like to advocate a sort of reverse process of domestication to counter the forces of homogenization that seem to threaten the existence of our languages in their own right. Let us infuse the English translations with as much of our cultural and linguistic material to sufficiently domesticate them and provide a useful glossary or footnotes. I must hasten to say that neither the glossary nor the footnotes should substitute for the homogenizing tendency.

The other way of countering the force of homogenization is to practice literal, word for word translation. The advantage of such a translation will help retain the flavour of the Indian language texts in their new English locale. Both the practice of domestication and literal translation may be unacceptable to publishers as well as readers in the name of easy readability. We are used to reading translations in English from different cultures outside India through prestigious publishing houses like the Heinemann and we don't complain. I do not know why we are up in arms when it comes to receiving culturally loaded translations from our own languages into English?

I would end by suggesting a couple of thumb rules for the kind of translation practice I would like to advocate drawing on my own

experience of collaborative translation with my friend and colleague, Uma.

1. **Editing:** In the name of greater readability, some translators wish to edit the source text. We have often heard fellow translators justifying their editing out portions of texts saying that there is a lot of repetition in the source and it may not be acceptable in English. To our shock, we have heard and seen translators justify changing the endings of texts, sometimes bringing in the authors of the source texts who they claim have acceded to their request for change. We believe that we have no right to tamper with the source in the name of editing.

2. **Structure of the source text:** We all know that English sentence structure is different from the structure of our own languages and therefore there is no way we can retain the Indian language structure in the English translation. However, there is every possibility of retaining the structure of the sentences in terms of their length. We would like to suggest that we do **not** break down long sentences in the source into shorter sentences in the target language, even if a sentence in the source is as long as a page. Never break down the structure of the source text in terms of dividing it into different new paragraphs or combining them. These to us are some aspects of the style of the source text which we can try to preserve in English.

3. **Proverbs and Idioms:** We are all used to translating proverbs and idiomatic expressions by looking for suitable equivalents in English wherever available and translating only those that have no ready equivalents. Proverbs and idioms, as all of us are aware, are deeply rooted in cultures. Therefore, there is a need to translate them perhaps even

literally into English to carry our cultures across into that language.

The problem of proverbs and idioms reminds me of our slow acceptance of Achebe's works. But we need to remember that the acceptance has perhaps come because he writes in English. We have also accepted Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, though we have taken our own time to do it and now even talk proudly of his 'foreword'. This too was written in English, in Indian Writing in English. But we have not been able to accept translations from Indian languages into English if they do not follow 'proper' English. Translations from other languages into English brought out by reputed publishers like Heinemann are exceptions. There is a need to become very conscious of this dichotomy in us. As translators we need to not only put pressure on our publishers to accept the need for a change in our translations, but also collectively voice our concern, not only in academic seminars, but also in other forums.

Notes

1. I acknowledge the insight of K. Suneetha Rani, who discusses this in one of the lessons she has written for Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Andhra Pradesh.

References

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