

Translation as an Act of Ventriloquism The Author-Translator Hegemony in English Translations of Kokborok Poetry

Ashes Gupta

Abstract

The paper is based on the researcher's empirical study as a translator of modern Kokborok poetry to English. The paper hypothesizes the following:

1. Translation initiates a dialogue across cultures in the dialectical space of the text being translated, through an act of conversion via language, from a source culture to a target culture, with the translator's essential position being that of an involved outsider interested in the language and culture to be translated.
2. However, the process of translation of Kokborok tribal poetry to English creates a hierarchy situating the translator at a higher position than the author by virtue of being a privileged language user (here English) and a representative of the dominant culture (here Bengali).
3. This perpetuates a hegemony based on such factors as economic superiority; political power; long history of oppression, exploitation, imperialism, cultural domination and the like, of the translator's culture (read the researcher's) vis-à-vis the author's /tribal culture.

Translation in such a case might be conceptualized as a one-way non-reciprocative movement (Kokborok to English only). The translator acts as an involved outsider interested in tribal language and culture who attempts at negating his/her own voice and identity to assume that of the author. However, since complete negation of the translator's identity/voice is impossible in any translation, the translator ends up appropriating the author's voice. Translation in such a case entails replacement of the author's voice by the translator's voice (the author being metaphorically dead). The tribal culture and language (here Kokbarak) has its own

defense mechanism too. It renders every translational attempt incomplete by retaining certain ambiguity in translation and resists simplistic and reductionist understanding of language/culture. Hence this paper focuses on the following issues/problems of such a translation:

1. The identity and authenticity of the voice/voices in such a text in translation.
2. Translation as a paradox that seemingly perpetuates cultural imperialism and at the same time subverts such attempts by rendering total translation impossible.
3. Whether translation is a mere linguistic ventriloquism?

It all started with sporadic attempts at translating Kokborok poetry to English. Kokborok is the language spoken by the ethnic majority of Tripura. A small, green speck of a state in the remote north-eastern corner of this country, Tripura has been made 'famous' by the national and international media as a Texas-sans-glamour where gun-trotting extremists have set up a jungle regime. No doubt this is true but only fractionally, since flowers still bloom here in the valleys, tribal belles are seen fording the pitcher by distant mountain brooks and love floats in the air like the sweet fragrance of wild orchids. Wandering minstrels sing lays of forgotten tribal war heroes and poets in the language write verses whose theme is not always essentially terrorism, exploitation and anti-terrorism. The impetus to translation was therefore contagious. Eight different tribes of Tripura speak Kokborok which is categorized under the Bodo branch of the Tibetan-Burmese language family. Organised writing in Kokborok began much later in the Bengali script though it is believed that there was a Kokborok script long ago which was eventually lost. Hence the necessity for presenting this treasure trove of compositions in Kokborok, both oral and written, ancient and modern, to the rest of the world in English and preserve them from oblivion was immediate.

This curtain raiser was necessitated as a prelude to the problematic of translation, especially the author-translator hegemony, which this paper attempts to address. The researcher's empirical study

as a translator provides the required perspective both for examining/analysing the translation process as well as the corresponding problematic. Translation as a process poses a few issues that a translator has to negotiate. And the perspective is even more problematised if the languages involved are Kokborok and English, the former essentially marginalized by the ethnic minority-mainstream majority divide, while the latter has enjoyed (and is still enjoying) a privileged position due to its mainstream status and its international currency. Moreover this also brings to scrutiny the position of the author vis-à-vis the translator (the researcher himself), the former being a member of the ethnic minority of Kokborok speakers and the latter being a representative of the Bangla speaking majority in the context of Tripura. The corresponding history of the two has been a saga of oppression, exploitation, imperialism, cultural domination, extremism and terrorism on one hand, and a unique cultural blend through matrimony, acculturation and interactive coexistence on the other. The resultant response which this attempt at translating Kokborok poetry to English generated among the ethnic minority of Kokborok speakers, writers and readers has itself been a fusion of encouragement and suspicion (as another exercise towards cultural domination and imperialism with the automatic enquiry—Why is he doing it?). These add up to the dynamics of the problem of translation that this paper intends to examine.

This paper is an attempt at comprehending translation as a process through which a dialogue across cultures (that of the author and the translator) is initiated in the dialectical space of the text in translation, by an act of conversion via language, from a source culture and language to a target culture and corresponding language. Hence the emphasis is essentially on translation not merely of one language to another, but of one culture to another (the term could be transculturation). Any translation for that reason necessitates that a translator negotiates the intricate network of cultural matrices that the text in translation and the language of the author presents. The position of the translator in this context that this paper proposes is essentially that of an involved outsider interested in the language and culture to be translated. Moreover translation of Kokborok poetry to English automatically creates a hierarchy situating the translator at a higher

position than the author by virtue of being a member of the mainstream majority and a user of a privileged language English with all its corresponding political, cultural and international 'superiority'. The researcher/ translator's psyche on analysis revealed two motives—a sympathetic cause in trying to absolve a part of the guilt evoked by the consciousness of a troubled past and a tense present, due to a long history of oppression of the ethnic community. The other was of exploring a lesser known and therefore academically viable area for research. These factors are essential for comprehending the power equations involved in the author-translator hegemony and for avoiding the trap of any simplistic and reductionist reading of the ensuing translation process.

Translation in this context could be conceptualized as a one way non-reciprocative movement i.e. Kokborok to English only, as the researcher failed to locate English to Kokborok translations of texts (except for certain chapters of the Bible, courtesy missionary zeal). The researcher/ translator undertook translation as an involved outsider who tends to negate his own identity and voice in order to assume those of the author. The Keatsian concept of negative capability comes handy here to comprehend the position of the translator. But the problem arises with 'capability' of negation as it implies both quantitative and qualitative paradigm—to what extent and to what intensity? Since complete negation of the translator's identity and voice is impossible in any such translation, the translator ends up appropriating the author's voice and identity, the author being metaphorically dead in terms of Roland Barthes' famous proposition. This even leads to a replacement of the author's voice and identity by those of the translator in extreme cases.

The obvious question that ensues is whether translation is ultimately an act of cultural and linguistic 'ventriloquism', where the author's voice and identity in translation are those of the translator's, conveniently replaced. Hence the first hurdle that the researcher/ translator in this context of translating from Kokborok to English had

to negotiate was to control this tendency of appropriation and ventriloquism as well as the resultant author-translator hegemony within safe limits. This paper therefore opines that the efficacy of translation depends on the minimization of this gap and in turn, controlling the unavoidable author-translator hegemony. As far as the translation of Kokborok poetry to English by the researcher/translator (that forms the empirical basis of this study) is concerned, doubts persist as to what extent this trap of ventriloquism has been avoided.

The concept of translation as a cultural and linguistic ventriloquism being an unavoidable reality and the difference between 'good' and 'bad' translations being only a difference in the degree of ventriloquism and not in kind, this paper further proposes to highlight the resultant paradox viz. the saving grace in any such translational process. The history of cultural domination and exploitation of the ethnic minority by the majority Bangla-speaking population in Tripura reveals that this was accentuated by the fact that Bengali culture was patronized by the kings of the State. Hence historically Bengali culture and language enjoyed a pride of position vis-à-vis Kokborok. The attitude towards Kokborok language and the corresponding culture has always been one of contempt. The worst part is that a sizeable fraction of the tribals themselves can neither speak nor read and write in this language. The fact that both S.D. Burman and R.D. Burman, the famous father-son duo of Hindi film music avoided writing Sachin Devburman and Rahul Devburman respectively ('Devburman' or 'Debbarma' indicates a Tripura tribal surname while 'Burman' indicates a Bengali identity with the 'Dev' part conveniently abbreviated) though they hailed from the tribal royal stock of Tripura, points out to the extreme efforts of assimilation in the stronger mainstream culture and language i.e. Bengali. Against this historical backdrop it is but imperative to view any such translation attempt as a neo-imperialistic stance that shall perpetuate the tacit top-down hierarchy between the translator and the author and also between the two cultures. The idea of the translator (as also the reader from mainstream culture) could be to go for a simplistic and bare literary understanding of the text to be translated

(minus a holistic comprehension of the intricacies of corresponding cultural nuances), thus demeaning the text and the culture in translation. If total translation would be possible then the integrity of the ethnic cultures such as those of the Kokborok speaking minority would be threatened by total understanding/comprehension/assimilation in the majority mainstream culture. Any such attempt gets dissipated into possibilities of cultural and linguistic ventriloquism and the resultant author-translator hegemony whose minimization and controllability determines the efficacy of translation. This acts as a saving grace by countering such neo-imperialistic tendencies and rendering each translation a ‘trans-creation’ from the translator’s point of view. The role of constructing meaning is very crucial here. A certain ambiguity in translation delimits the scope of every entity as far as meaning is concerned. This could be expressed in the following manner:

$$\begin{array}{rcccl} \textbf{Meaning} & = & \textbf{Meaning} & + & \textbf{Ambiguity} \\ \text{(in original text)} & & \text{(in translation)} & & \text{(non-translatable cultural} \\ & & & & \text{connotations)} \end{array}$$

For instance, the researcher encountered the Kokborok word *maichung* (pronounced ‘maichu’). The immediate effort of finding a one-word equivalent in English having failed, the only alternative was to retain the original word in the translated text with a footnoting in the form of an explanatory phrasal construct of the type:

a bundle of boiled rice packed in banana leaves fastened
with a string of bamboo twig.

But the original word connotes certain cultural-specifics that such a translation or any translation for that matter fails to convey. The fact that preparing *maichung* is an essential activity of the women of the family, who wrap up along with it their love and concern for the male member of the family—the bread earner—whom *maichung* is supposed to sustain throughout the day, is unaccounted for in this translation. So is also the remembrance of the mother or the wife back

home which the *maichung* triggers as an emotionally sustaining throw-back. These and much more together contribute to the intricate network of culture-specific connotations, social and emotional bondings that lead to an untranslatable space in the construction of meaning in translation. The idea is that a mere reading of such a text of a poem in translation fails to lead to a complete understanding of the culture as a whole. These untranslatable spaces in meaning serve as defense mechanism for preserving the integrity of such cultures under threat by guaranteeing a certain loss in connotation during translation and rendering all translations trans-creations.

At the same time this loss in translation due to untranslatable spaces guarantees scope for a one-to-one dialogue between the author, the translator and the reader in the dialectical space of the text being translated. This paper proposes that, theoretically this also ensures that the translator and reader make no attempts at a simplistic and reductionist comprehension of the author's cultural specifics from a hegemonic position of cultural superiority and privileged sympathy. Rather the translator and reader of such a text in translation, faced with a deadlock of untranslatable ambiguous spaces in meaning (working as defense mechanism/counter strategies of the culture and language in translation, threatened to assimilation and extinction/merger), is bound to negate the top-down and vertical hierarchy of the translator-author and reader-author. The result is an essential feeling of respect towards the language and culture being translated, thus subverting the author-translator hegemony which a mainstream majority culture and language (that of the translator/ researcher) in such a case perpetuates.

However, this paper only proposes these as theoretical postulates as was felt by the researcher/translator during his attempts at translating Kokborok poetry to English with all the contextual variables playing a very significant role both in the process of translation as well as in the analysis of the empirical data thus generated.

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