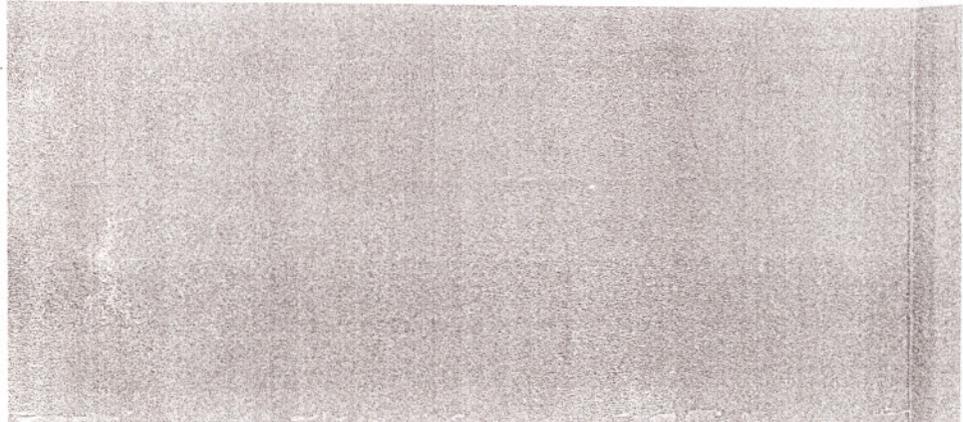


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Estudios y Ensayos

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Universidad de Málaga

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MORE ON(UN)TRANSLATABILITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of intralinguistic, interlinguistic, and even inter-semiotic translation is quintessentially one of equivalence, the first across intravarieties, the second across individual codes and the third across media, or at least so it was thought. As things stand today however the target text/creation may not even be dynamically equivalent to the source text. It may be different from the original in ways which may be defined by things like relevance to the target culture and a host of other things which seemed delightfully muddled, aberrant and irrational at one stage but from over which the murk is slowly and thankfully lifting. (Literary) Translation is seen as an act of intercultural communication, a culturally relevant act of mediation between cultures, as a form of cultural interarticulation and not merely as an unproblematically mechanical transfer of determinate semantic cargo from one language to another. The culturally creative side of translation. (There is clearly a culturally creative side to translation as there is a linguistically creative side to translation. The latter becomes visible with the visibility of the translator, which happens when there is no attempt at a 'domesticating' translation).

This is fair enough, sensible enough! There have been obvious problems about the postmodernist position that the translator can manipulate the original in the service of power and ideology, and more generally, that she can do **anything** with the original. (See Giridhar (2005) for some argumentation, Singh (2004) for an interrogation of TS as an academic discipline, and James Clifford (1997) for a critique of the postmodernist 'prescriptive

antiessentialism'). How far can the translator go away from the original, to realms which are arguably outside the bounds of what is called 'dynamic equivalence' was a question that needed to be debated, and Guldin (2003), among others, has gone some way in redressing the balance. If translation is seen as 'a decisional act of ethical responsibility' something Guldin (ibid) argued for, which could temper the postmodernist Derridaean messy madness, then that would be fine. This is of course to agree that one need not be talking about language at all when one is talking about translation. When and why and how much of Shakespeare for instance was translated into a particular language may have nothing to do with the source and target languages as formal codes. It obviously has to do with nonlanguage, with the nature and state of receiving sociocultural ethos as well as the nature and state of giving sociocultural ethos. Although translation has to proceed from a linguistic code, not a word needs to be said when one talks about translation. Translation could be legitimately viewed as a site of ideologically invested struggle, as a catalyst of social change, as a place of social activism, as a possible channel for the release of sociocultural energy, as a terrain of conflict, resistance, as a site where a mutual enrichment of the two meeting cultures is in the offing, a place where structure and agency interact, and so on. This is also because the linguistics of translation is admittedly not the only kind of translation that is possible. One could talk also of the hermeneutics of translation, of the politics of translation, of the axiology of translation, of the sociology of translation, of the anthropology of translation, of the phenomenology of translation and so on. One could discourse on translation as it relates to human ontology, epistemology, to awarenesses like feminism, nationalism, ethnicism and so on.

2. THE PROBLEM OF (UN)TRANSLATABILITY

This is a linguistics-of-translation paper. It seeks to touch base with the problem of (un)translatability, especially as it has to do

with the nature of language: 'linguistic' untranslatability. What is called 'cultural untranslatability' needs however to be perspectivalised. As I have argued elsewhere, the untranslatability of words like the Sanskrit *dharma* has been mindlessly exaggerated. This is supposed to be an instance of cultural untranslatability. People have with an exultant undertone said the word has as many as forty-two meanings in Sanskrit, one of its many meanings being that insentient entities also have *dharma* where the meaning is 'essential property'. The *dharma* of water for instance is that it flows from high to low and so on. That the English word 'religion' is not quite its equivalent, and so on. This is no big deal it seems to me. That a particular word in language A has x number of meanings is nothing to crow about as linguists well know. Secondly, most of these forty-two meanings of the word are delimited, delimitable meanings in particular contexts. In Kannada, a South Dravidian language for example, *dharma patni* 'dharma wife' means a 'legally wedded wife', nothing more and nothing less. In a collocation like *dharma chatra*, the meaning of *dharma* is 'free; gratis' so that the meaning of the expression is 'a charitable dwelling place'. If the word appears in an application it means 'religion', nothing more and nothing less... My almost routine statement in translation classes and expositions on translation has been that if you can express the meaning of any word in any language, if the meaning is externalisable at all, then that meaning is translatable in SOME fashion in other languages. The only proviso, and this is an important proviso, is that that meaning may not find holophrastic expression in many languages. If the meaning has to be expressed in more than one word, then the architecture of the source text is dented in direct proportion to the number of words required to express it. This may well appear and does indeed in most such cases appear inelegant, uneconomical and awkward. A translation of the English *seagull* for instance into Hindi as *jal-kawwa* water-crow is a case in point. This could evoke derisive laughter. This viz. such intuitively felt askew oddness is almost expected because of a basic fact about language viz. that human languages are unique and specialised evolutions of the human capacity for communi-

cation. They are irreplaceable units of knowledge, perception and thought. They represent unique and specialized worldviews. One particular language's way of looking at the universe is not some other language's. And one human language is simply not expected to encode all possible ways of looking at the universe. That is not a practical or possible proposition at all. The result is that if you want to express what is an intrinsic part of another language, part of that language's world view, then a certain awkwardness and inelegance ensue, simply because the other language is not originally equipped to handle the concept. It has per force to take the mode of instant creation, elaboration, description, improvisation, innovation and so on. This could be looked upon as one of the limitations of translation. Curiously people have said the equivalents of an English sentence like 'let there be light and there was light!' in Indian languages sound odd. I am inclined to attribute this oddness to the specialized uniqueness of the world views that languages give vent to, which was broached earlier. If translations into any other language of English sentences like

1. I want a girl/boy I can breathe into my soul
2. Rachel ratcheted up her life
3. Being as she is, a self-destructively sensitive person, she has shambled in the trackless expanse of a mind-boggling personality-arresting psychic frame, chafing under some incredibly subtle ramifications of interpersonal space and daily life
4. Bhaskara is basking in the balmy bracing splendour of the opulence of his own consciousness.

leave an English-proficient person bilingual in the language of translation *somehow* unsatisfied, I believe it is because languages have staked out their own paths in cognising reality and codifying such cognition in their linguistic codes. This would of course be true also in a translational transaction from other languages into English and so on, which fact surely is one of the ways natural languages even out. There are of course untranslatable linguistic

objects and phenomena, which have been documented in the literature. Sound is untranslatable. In Kannada for example the word for 'house' is *mane* in one dialect and *mani* in another. There cannot be any differential translation of this in English. As has been recognised in the literature, a childhood rhyme like

twinkle twinkle little star
how I wonder what you are

is well nigh untranslatable not just because of its sound value but also because in the target language the childhood associations that go with the sound in the source language would be totally missing. Notice that such childhood associations may even be tied to nonsense words. Phonologically contrived feedback to meaning is untranslatable. The following is untranslatable in other languages because the resonance between the two meanings of *left* and the two meanings of *right* that is possible in English because of which the text has the internal rhetoric that it does is missing in other languages:

My brain has two parts: the left and the right. About the right part there is nothing right and in the left there is nothing left!

Or the following

A: How is your maidservant?
B: She is good as maidservants go

After some time

A: How is your maidservant?
B: She went as maidservants go.

The fact of the matter is that human languages are unique worlds, unique cosmoses in themselves. One needs to feel this universe for a matching level, point or plane to zero in on the exact parallel. This is to aver that there is nothing like a word-to-word

translation. There is this well-known direct marketing company called Amway, where people can 'go' emerald, diamond and so on when they achieve a certain level. I have heard this being translated into Hindi as

aap emerald/ daimand jaayenge
you(pl) emerald/diamond go-will

which is literal Hindi for 'You will go emerald/ diamond' which is, as you can see, ridiculous in Hindi.

To say however that the meaning of a word is absolutely untranslatable seems to be too strong a statement. This is so because we are interrelated in what we want to express and do express. This in turn is so because we humans are biologically, cognitively and emotionally prewired identically. Our biological, cognitive and emotional foundations are the same. We possess the same biological systems, are capable of the same emotions and are subject to the same cognitive behaviour. Our ability for example for rational thought – the ability to deduce conclusions from a set of data – is essentially the same. That this ability is submerged, snowed down under and almost pressured into nonexistence by the (amazing subjugating power of) the shibboleths, shenanigans and aberrant collective perceptions of a cultural set up is a separate story altogether. The parametric variations that individual cultures could possibly be, and in fact are, are a build up on these undoubtedly common foundations that all human beings share. People have argued that cultures are at some level incommensurable. Does this incommensurability start from above this level where we are similarly grounded?

First of all the denotative boundaries of a word may be identical. Words like man woman, child, house etc have congruent denotative boundaries in various languages so that an interlinguistic transfer is totally unproblematic. A rider here is that when we say the boundaries of denotation are the same we don't mean they are the same empirically. A house in the Angami area (a Naga language spoken in Nagaland in India), a house in Ireland

and a house in Iceland may look different in actual fact. Yet what is denoted by the words is equivalent in the sense of 'a dwelling place' in these languages and hence would very well serve as equivalents. Denotative boundaries of words on the other hand may not be congruent. *tosu* 'a traditional male wear' for example in Mao Naga another Naga language spoken in Manipur in India is not quite the 'kilt' that Scottish highlanders wear. Their denotative boundaries are not the same so that to translate *tosu* of Mao Naga as 'kilt', as people have incorrectly suggested, would be misrepresentative and therefore incorrect. One could argue that such accuracy may be needed in nonliterary translation, but not in literary translation. In literary translation such accuracy of anthropological information may be arguably unimportant. One does not go to literary pieces, seeking anthropological or sociological information. The aim of creative literature is not documentation of accurate anthropological information. For example the word for 'to marry' when the speaker is female and singular in Mao Naga is *cu-vu*. This expression literally is house (cu)-go (vu). This expresses the patrilocal nature of marriage in the Mao Naga society. This means that after the wedding the girl spends the rest of her married life in her husband's 'house' which is where she 'goes' after the wedding ceremony. There are different verbs in Mao for 'to marry' which is a function of whether the speaker is one or many, male or female. There are no such finer distinctions made in the English verb 'to marry'. One could argue the omnibus 'to marry' of English hardly does justice to such fine-grained distinction in Mao. Noticeably there is precious little that one could do in such situations of translational transaction except to footnote or endnote a descriptive/ explanatory note somewhere. Here however the anthropological information seems to be important. One can only express it with the aid of a footnote.

Words and expressions with identical denotative boundaries may differ in connotation. This additional component of connotation in the otherwise equivalent expressions would render the expressions nonequivalent. The words *negro* and *nigger*, for example, differ only in connotation in that the latter is derogatory. One

can't invent a pair like this in the target language to parallel this. The only option is a descriptive note. There could be some cultural load, which an otherwise equivalent expression might carry and which makes it nonequivalent. This needs some extended comment in the form of some elucidation about the language-culture dialectic. That everything in a language is culturally significant is one view, which does not stand serious scrutiny. One assumes that the phrase 'culturally significant' would mean the signifier and the signified are inseparably reciprocal. This obviously does not make sense because in a huge number of sentences one could with comfort wrench the signified in language A and express the quintessence in codified form in language B.

An Angami sentence like

a vor tyo

is easily renderable into English as

I will come

into Kannada as

naanu bartini

into Hindi as

mai aawunga

and so on into umpteen other languages. I submit that there is nothing lost in translational transit here, pace Quine and a host of others who have naively disapprovingly talked about a 'naively representational' view of language. More significantly I would hazard the claim that if languages as formal codes are so inseparably enmeshed in the cultures they are supposed to give vent to, then, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* must be a vector of two sen-

sibilities, two cultural ethos, the English and the Igbo, or even more strictly, *Things Fall Apart* still expresses the sensibility the English language was originally supposed to cognise and codify viz, the English sensibility and world view, and should not be able to express any other non-English thought-movement, which are perceptions, as far as I can see, which are untenable and vacuous. What this could mean for translation is that what is called 'cultural untranslatability' needs to be examined more intently, closely and critically for what in point of fact it is. See Giridhar (1981) for a discussion of the language-culture dialectic.

Another major reason behind untranslatability is the difference in the grammatical dynamics of words. Let us take up a word like *bereaved* in English. It could be used either as an attributive adjective as in 'a bereaved man' or as a predicate adjective as in 'he is bereaved'. When it is used as a predicate adjective it takes as its subject the person whose someone died. In most languages this does not happen so that in a language like Kannada an initial translation of the English sentence 'He is bereaved' is

Avan kaDeyavaru yarO tIrikoNdaru
he-acc side-gen-3pl someone pass away-refl-tns-3pl

Which means 'someone on his side died' or to put it in more felicitous English, 'someone he related to died'. The English sentence is not about 'someone' but about 'he' So there is already some distortion. Note further that English leaves the identity of who died delightfully open and inexplicit whereas in languages like Kannada we need to have a subject that talks about the one who died, even an indefinite subject like 'someone'. The problem is that English does not force the speaker to specify who it was who died. The subject of the English sentence is not the one who died. There is nothing in the English language which prevents me from saying 'I am bereaved' even when my enemy dies. Which means whoever you say died in languages like Kannada is going to be incorrect! The conclusion is that Kannada and languages like Kannada don't have a word whose grammar resembles that of the

English word 'bereaved' so that in fact there is no translation of the English sentence 'He is bereaved' in languages like Kannada.

Finally, the one-to-many correspondence across languages leads to untranslatability. This also takes away from the effable adequacy of linguistic systems. In Hindi/Urdu for example the second person pronoun is tripartite: *tuu* (you singular and intimate), *tum* singular or plural and more distant) and *aap* (you plural or you singular and extrahonorific) Part of an Urdu poem reads as follows:

taap ban gayi tum
tum ban gayiN tuu

Guess the English translation

you became you
and you became you (thou ?)

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