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TRANSLATION AS AN ACT OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL
EXCHANGE: PROBLEMATICS OF EQUIVANCE

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discover the significance of translation as an act of rewriting and the problems of equivalence that emerge while rendering syntactical ambiguities of a Source Language (SL) into a Target Language (TL). We know that translation as a process of conveying message across linguistic and cultural barriers is an eminently communicative activity. No denying the fact that translation plays a vital role not only in the communication of different people from different nations, but also in the development of a nation's politics, culture and society. Translation performs a yeoman's job in transferring the literary and cultural values to the world. In the past, scholars attached great importance to the source text, considering it as positive and authoritative. Translation, however, was regarded as derivative and servile. In the 1980s, the appearance of cultural turn was a satisfying change. Despite all its merits, it draws attention to the issues that are beyond equivalence and fidelity. A translation can very rarely render the original text word-

for-word in another language and convey its meaning unchanged (e.g. Nida 1964, Catford 1978, Chesterman 2000, Shuping 2013). Structural ambiguities of a source language often pose intractable problems to translate their form, emotion, spirit and cultural ethos into a Target Language. While doing so, it makes the process difficult rather impossible. This study presents a few syntactical ambiguities of two Indian classical languages such as Odia and Sanskrit and the problems of equivalence encountered by the translators while rendering such syntactical ambiguities of the source languages in English to make them at times faithful and beautiful.

Key words: ambiguity, equivalence, Linguistic, Problematics, Translation, Ornamental, Culture

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Translation is a fundamental human activity that occurs between languages, cultures, and forms of expression. It is the skilful art of recreating an equivalent message of a work of art originally created in one language. The word 'translation' comes from the Latin word *translatio*, deriving from *transferre*, 'to transfer' in English, which is formed by two parts, 'trans' and 'ferre'. In English, the prefix 'trans' means 'across', whereas 'ferre' means 'to carry.' *Transferre*, therefore, means 'to carry across' in English (Kasperek, 1983). Translation is a communicative act of transport between languages, but the term does, in fact, mean much more than just 'to transfer', 'to carry'. Translation enables communication between members of different cultural communities. It bridges the gap between situations where differences in verbal and nonverbal behaviour, expectations, knowledge and perspectives are such that there is not enough common ground for the sender and receiver to communicate effectively by themselves (Hatim & Munday, 2004).

Translation of literature has an undeniably important role in helping us understand the cultures in the world around us. Without translation, even the most erudite readers would have limited acquaintance with other

cultures. Literature across frontiers denotes international literary exchange across the world with the help of translated literature and support for literary translation which have an unprecedented visibility and a support infrastructure. Translation as an independent discipline is gaining ground in the wake of spread of knowledge and globalization of literature. The constantly increasing love and demand for translation the world over has brought about a sea change in its concept and character. Translation into Target Language (TL) promotes and enhances the dignity and power of the Source Language (SL). Great poets of English language use the ideas in their works. According to David Daiches, "Science says things explicitly, directly and simply whereas poetry expresses itself paradoxically, ironically, indirectly, obliquely in language which is far from having a one-for-one Abstract: Broadly speaking, translation is finding expressions in another language preserving the semantic and stylistic equivalence, matching grammatical structures and cultural contexts. Put simply, translation can be considered as the replacement of the elements of the source text with the cultural context and grammatical and semantic conventions of the target language so as to transfer the impact of the source text on the mind of a reader

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who, being unilingual, has no way of experiencing it in the original form.”

Despite all possible efforts, translation often poses difficulty for the translator to resolve satisfactorily in order to produce a good translation. Some critics in the field of translation studies contend that translation is a suspect practice. They underscore that a work of translation at best cannot and should not be treated as an equal to the original. Robert Frost is of the view: ‘Poetry is that which is lost in translation’. Translators actually face problems in the areas of equivalence and naturalness when they render the Source Language (SL) into Target Language (TL). The responsibilities of a translator are to appease the author, the critic and the reader at the same time. His product has to be artistic, faithful and yet original. If a translation is beautiful, it is not faithful; and if it is faithful, it is not beautiful.

1.1 Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to show some of the linguistic and cultural challenges involved in the translation activity and how these challenges deter the effective way of bridging a language pair. This paper seeks to discuss the problematics of

equivalence in transferring syntactical ambiguities and cultural nuances of SL to TL.

1.2 Problematic of translation

Problematics refer to the technical problems and difficulties that a translator encounters while rendering syntactical ambiguities and cultural nuances of Source Language into Target Language. A linguistic and cultural gap persists between the SL and TL because of loss of equivalence.

In this paper, the following problematics of equivalence are encountered while translating original Odia and Sanskrit texts into the target text English.

1.3 Linguistic Challenges

Working with translation or any of its associated fields implies being fully at ease in manipulating language. At the same time, it is almost impossible to control language without considering the code that governs it. Though dreaded by many, linguistic norms and rules are unavoidable as stated by Newmark (1988). Grammar is the skeleton of a text, vocabulary or lexis is its flesh; and collocations, the tendons that connect the one to the other. Grammar gives you the general and main focus about a text:

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statements, questions, requests, purpose, reason, condition, time, place, doubt, feeling, certainty. Considering, therefore, that grammar is a conveyer of meaning, it follows that incorrect grammar conveys wrong meaning. This is equally true for translation. As succinctly put by Quirk and Greenbaum (2010) “Grammar is a complex system, the parts of which cannot be properly explained in abstraction from the whole. In this sense, all parts of a grammar are mutually defining, and there is no simple linear path we can take in explaining one part in terms of another”.

1.3.1 Structural Ambiguities

Just being a bilingual does not entail one to be a professional translator. The profession demands more than that. Disambiguating ambiguous words, phrases, lines or sentences causes a lot of problems for the translator to render word-for-word transfer. *Ambiguous expressions usually have more than one layer of meaning.* Transfer of equivalence becomes almost impossible. To overcome this problem, the translator must be well-versed with the vocabulary of both languages. This may require the translator to commit to learning the two languages extensively. It is often

difficult and rather impossible to transfer the same effect of the source language to the target language. Particularly, classical poems pose intractable problems for which the translators hardly dare venture to touch this area.

The following immortal lines by the great Odia poet Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja echo ambiguous implications because they have more than one layer of meaning:

• *babu naka shiri dana jogya josaku, bihara kananakari alinganaku.*

Lord Rama writes this to his younger brother Laxmana and sends it with Surpanakha (Ravana’s sister) who appeals for love and marriage.

i. **First layer of meaning:** *naka* = heaven; *shiri* = beautiful; *josa* = woman; *bihara*=roam *kanan*=forest; *alingana*= embrace

‘O Laxman! This woman is more beautiful than the most beautiful woman even in the heaven. Hence, love her, embrace her and roam with her in the forest.

ii. **Second layer of meaning:** *naka*= nose; *shiri*= ears; *bi hara*= cut *kana nakari*= without listening.

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‘O Laxman! This is a wicked woman and cut her nose and ears without listening to her. This was the real intention of Lord Rama and Laxman did the needful and the purpose was served. Then, how can the translator transfer the same elements of ambiguity from the source text to the target text with the same kind of structure, rhythm, music, meaning and effect?

The ancient most Sanskrit language is also rich in ambiguous lines which are very difficult to translate to the target language English. The following example in Sanskrit echoes such ambiguities making them difficult to translate:

• *bhuja chuda samajukta lanka maricha mardanam,*
binshardha kadalim chaiba bandai raghunandanam.

i. **First layer of meaning:** Let parched rice and beaten rice, green chillies and ten bananas be mixed and thrown into mouth in lumps by uttering the name of God i.e. Sri Rama.

ii. **Second layer of meaning:** bhu= the earth; ja= born; samajukta= together; Maricha= a demon and accomplice of Ravana of Lanka; *binshardhaka dalim= (binsha=*

twenty+ *ardhak=* half= ten in toto= the ten headed Ravana, the ruler of Lanka). It is due to Lord Rama and Goddess Sita, the dangerous demons like Maricha and Ravana were killed by Rama whom I salute.

• *keshabam patitam drustwa dronah harsamupagatah*

rudranti pandabah sarbe ha keshabah ha keshabah

i. **First layer of meaning:** Seeing the fall of Lord Krishna, Drona became happy and the Pandabas started weeping by crying ‘ha Keshaba ha Keshaba’

ii. **Second layer of meaning:** (ke= in water; drona= crow; pandabah= jackals)

Seeing the dead bodies floating in water, crows became very happy but the jackals started weeping unhappily by crying ‘dead bodies in water, dead bodies in water’ because they would not be able to go into water and eat them.

Is it possible to transfer the same elements of ambiguity from the source text to the target text which must have the same kind of structure, rhythm, music, meaning and effect?

The following example in Odia echoes such ambiguities making them difficult to translate:

• *Bali padi to charanu, asanka upuje enu ...*

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Nauka nauka hele budiba bhela

i. **First layer of meaning: Nauka nauka hele budiba bhela.** If the boat turned into a woman as a rock had turned into a beautiful woman (ref-Ahalya), his sustenance would be lost as he maintained his family with this profession.

ii. **Second layer of meaning: Nau/ka nauka hele budiba bhela.** If the boat turned into a woman who would be another's, he would suffer double loss. One, he would lose his boat which would turn into woman. Two, If the boat turned into a beautiful woman, he might keep her as his wife. But he had to suffer another loss if the woman would go away as Ahalya had done.

Translators very often face problems in disambiguating words, phrases and sentences having more than one layer of meaning in the following Odia texts. A man once said the following words to a *paanwala*:

- *are podamuhan, bidi lagaibi ghodamuhan, diasilite de*

The *paanwala* became red in anger because he was addressed as 'podamuhan' and 'ghodamuhan' but was placated when the subtleties of the ambiguities inherent in the

statement were succinctly explained in the following way:

- *are, podamuhan bidi lagaibi, ghodamuhan diasilite de*

The meaning suddenly took a different turn when the man explained that he actually had a *podamuhan bidi* (almost half-burnt because half-smoked and preserved for reuse.) which he wanted to lit with a horse-brand matchbox. How can the translation carry the same elements of ambiguity from the source text to the target text which must have the same kind of single structure with both the meanings inherent in it?

1.3.2 Homonyms

Like English, Indian languages have many words with multiple meanings. Such words are known as homonyms which are spelled and pronounced the same way but mean different depending on the context. For instance, the word "date" could mean a particular day, a fruit, or a meeting with someone one loves.

The following example in Odia becomes difficult for a translator to translate the text:

- *dekhare nalini nalini nalinire purita,*

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***bhramanti bhramare bhramare
bhramare a shobhita.***

Meaning: *nalini*=woman;
nalini=pond; *nalini*=lotus,
bhramare=bees *bhramare*=
mistakenly; *bhramare*=full of bees
everywhere

1.3.3 Ornamental words

Ornamental words (rhetorics) based on lyricism are also almost impossible to translate. The main sources of ambiguity in translation are the lexical and structural distinctions owing to lexical holes, cultural gaps and multiword units between the languages concerned. Jayant Mahapatra, the renowned international poet, rightly observes: ‘Any poem will not move fluently into translation. In Odia literature, the problem is of language which is especially noticeable with the earlier poets like Upendra Bhanja who used language with such powers of magic and devotion that resulted in instilling in readers’ minds a divine and perhaps a mystic presence. Their poems are sag with the weight of ornamentation and alliterative sounds. The sounds of words seem to dig into the mind and meander in the deeper layer of imagination. To me, a good translation into English seems almost impossible to make. Lines from Radhanath Ray’s

‘Chilka’ below show the unique ornamental words’:

- ***Utkala-kamala-bilas-dirghika/
Marala-malini-nilambu-chilika,
Utkalara-tuhi-charu-alankar/
Utkala-bhubane-shobhara-
bhandara.***

The following examples also show how ornamental words pose difficulty in rendering them into English.

- ***kiba prasanshiba prashansha
padabi achhi kiba balaratire?
muka kariachi je balamanira
sricharana bala ratire.***

Once, a self-styled poet wrote the above first line to the Utkal Ghant Jadumani and asked him if he could complete the next line by using ***balaratire*** in order to prove his efficiency as a poet and Jadumani completed the line as above.

Balarati= *Indra*, the God of the heaven; *muka kariachhi*= silenced; *balamanira*= of a beautiful woman; *bala*= *payal, nupur*; *ratire*= at night

1.4 Translating culture

Language is a culture-bound phenomenon. It exists in the cultural and historical perspective of the users and has a whole tradition associated with it. Language is embedded in culture. Understanding the cultural aspects of the Source and

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Target languages is an essential precondition for a translation work. A rendition of culture-specific words, religious customs and ceremonies, poetic fancies, mythological allusions, archetypal images and philosophical contexts therefore becomes problematic.

- *bajila sankha, bajila ghanta subhila hulahulisanakirttanare Mangalpura grama pade uchhuli*

Here, *sankha, ghanta, hulahuli, sankirttana* are ‘culture-words’ which are typically Indian having no English equivalent and are used in certain context. Besides, *uchhuli* is a word whose exact equivalent is difficult to supply. Therefore, ‘culture-words’ like these are difficult to translate. In addition to this, a translator cannot transfer hundred per cent of equivalence in some culture-specific words and expressions like *pituni tax, paltana, kilapotei, babanabhuta, kokua, nabagunjara, ganga kahile thibi gangi kahile jibi*.

1.5 Conclusion

Naturally, translation will always imply a communicative act of transport between languages and it will always bridge the language gap when there is not enough common ground for the sender and receiver to communicate effectively (Kasperek,

1983). Considering that the purpose of translation is to establish an equivalent effect (Nida, 1964) between a language pair, it makes sense to consider the necessary strategies to do so in academic discourse.

Despite all such problems, the desire to translate has shown an upward trend. Ironically, it is the problems that make the art of translation challenging and finally fascinating. Languages flourish with translation and perish without it.

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