

Translation into English and Challenges before a Translator: A Study with Special Reference to Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour before Dawn*

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Abstract

Translation is concerned with communication of meaning and it has to do with linguistics as well as culture. The challenges before a translator are many. Finding an equivalent between the two texts is the aim of the translator. The translator's concern with the literary text as made up of a language is not simple because the text also has words charged with memory, associations, and literary echoes. A total translation is regarded as a myth. Cicero's dilemma between word for word rendering leading to an uncouth translation and the sense for sense rendering which requires changes leading to a departure from the function of a translator is a dilemma which every translator faces.

Keywords: Translation, Source Language, Target Language, Challenges, Communication.

Translation is an intimate act of transferring the meaning of a text from the Source Language (SL) to the Target Language (TL). The transfer of meaning of the Source Language Text (SLT) is done not only by offering the equivalent elements in the Target Language Text (TLT) but also by bringing the intended elements of meaning of the SLT into the TLT. In this act of transferring the meaning from the SL into the TL it is not easy to find full equivalence of an SL word in another word in TL and this conceptualises that total translation is not possible. While translating the SL meaning into the TL meaning retaining as much sense as possible, the translator faces a number of problems. The present paper discusses in brief the problems faced by the translators in general and Maitreyee Siddhanta Chakravarty who translated Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's Assamese novel *Antoreep* into English as *The Hour before Dawn* in particular.

The problems that the translator faces in translating a text from the source language into the target language are plural in number. Of these problems one problem that the translator faces is the problem caused by syntax. Bijay Kumar Das in his book *A Handbook of Translation Studies* says that 'English is SVO (subject, verb, object) language but most of the Indian languages including Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and Oriya are SOV (subject, object, verb) language' (45). Assamese also being an SOV (subject, object, verb) language creates problems to the translator when s/he goes ahead with the job of translating the Assamese text into English. For example, "Aami bhaat khao" is an SOV sentence in Assamese where 'Aami'(We) is subject, 'bhaat' (rice) is object and 'khao' (eat) is verb but when we translate it into English as 'We eat rice' it becomes an SVO sentence.

The non-native speakers of the English language create several expressions in this language which is peculiarly un-English. In India the speakers of the English language have become very popular with expressions such as 'I am seeing you' instead of 'I see you', 'I am feeling cold' instead of 'I feel cold', 'I am loving you' instead of 'I love you', 'I was liking you' instead of 'I liked you', 'I was hearing a loud sound' instead of 'I heard a loud sound', etc. The grammar aspects of translation give a unique kind of problematic situation in the context of translation of Indian literary texts into English. English being one of the most important languages of creative writing in India is full of such un-English features. These features offer the translators who translate the Indian literary texts into English a choice which is also a challenge. In order to maintain the grammatical compatibility on the same level as semantic compatibility is maintained, the translator of *The Hour before Dawn* has applied several methods. The expression 'She was seeing him' mentioned in the novel (P.37) is in present continuous tense which is not grammatically correct. But the

translator not only has to change the language of the SLT but s/he also creates a kind of new language which goes with the expression of the SLT because the English language created by the Indian speakers under the influence of their own mother tongue is closer to their experiences.

The translators translating the Indian literary texts face the kind of problems called the problems of homonyms because there are many words with the same form in different languages with different meanings. 'Darun' in Bengali means 'big' and it is used with slightly different meaning in Oriya in expressions such as 'darun dukh' (great sorrow) or 'darun aghat' (great shock). R. S. Pathak in his article *Untranslatability: Myth or Reality?* gives a list of such words in the following passage:

The problem gets compounded because the same form gives different meanings in different languages. For example, 'uphar' in Marathi signifies 'refreshment', but it means in Hindi 'a present', and 'uttejit' means 'inspired' in Marathi and 'angry or agitated' in Hindi. 'Shiksha' in Hindi is 'teaching or education' and in Marathi 'punishment'. 'Razinama' is used in Marathi in the sense of 'resignation', but in Hindi it means 'agreement'. Similarly, the word 'ashudh' means in Hindi 'incorrect' or 'impure'; in Kashmiri it means 'very precious'[thing] and also 'medicine' or 'cure'. 'Jal' in Hindi is 'water', but 'zal' in Kashmiri is 'urine'. 'Manhoos' in Kashmiri means 'unsocial, shy, gloomy' and in Hindi 'ominous' or 'inauspicious'. Such 'false friends' and deceptive cognates will only make the translator's task further complicated. Polysemy and oligosemy, like lexical gaps, also obstruct successful translatability. Moreover, the translator should be able to differentiate between the denotative, connotative and idiomatic meanings of words. Then, words come to acquire certain associations in languages. According to Bertrand Russell, "no one can understand the word 'cheese' unless he has a non-linguistic acquaintance with cheese". Some words gain in due course semiotic function like nodding or shaking of the head or pointing. Roman Jakobson rightly points out that "we distinguish three ways of interpreting a verbal sign: it may be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, non-verbal system of symbols." Because of their undertones of connotative meanings translation of some words becomes still more problematic. A couple of examples will make it clear. Dove in Bengali is not a symbol of peace; it is equivalent of a cunning, unprincipled person who drives people out of their homes. The word 'dushta' in Bengali is the highest abuse and conveys far more than what it does in Hindi and other cognate languages. 'Reja' has two meanings in Orissa alone: in and around Sambalpur it means 'a woman worker', but in other dialects of Oriya it stands for 'change or loose coins' (22-23).

The translator is expected to capture all the different shades of connotations of words. The literariness of a literary text heavily depends on the play of meanings and the different shades of meanings of words become a part of the narrative.

India as a multilingual country bears a large number of regional languages which have their own words for explaining relationship of a person with another. These relationship words in Indian language culture also often remain untranslated. The relationship words like 'uncle', 'aunt', 'brother-in-law', 'cousin', etc. have a lot of equivalent words in Indian languages. The word 'Kokaiti' is equivalent to 'elder brother'; 'Soru Bapu' is equivalent to 'younger son'; 'Khura', 'Chacha', 'Mama', 'Peha', 'Moha' or 'Mausa' are equivalent to 'uncle'; 'Mausera Bhai', 'Chachera Bhai', 'Mamera Bhai', 'Fufera Bhai', 'Mauseri Bahan', 'Chacheri Bahan', 'Mameri Bahan' and 'Fuferi Bahan' are equivalent to 'cousin'; 'Khuri', 'Mahi', 'Mami' are equivalent to 'aunt'; 'Deuta', 'Pitai', 'Baba' are equivalent to 'father'; 'Ma', 'Aai' are equivalent to 'mother'; 'Baideu' is equivalent to 'elder sister'; 'Bowari' is equivalent to 'daughter-in-law'; 'Nobou' is equivalent to 'sister-in-law'/'elder brother's wife'; 'Dada' is equivalent to 'elder brother' in Assamese or grandfather in Bengali. 'Brother-in-law' means 'saala', 'jeeja', 'bhini', etc. 'Sister-in-law' has four equivalent words in Hindi such as 'nanad', 'bhabhi', 'jethani', and 'devrani'. In Assamese 'saali', 'nanad', 'nobou', 'bowari', etc. are equivalent to 'sister-in-law'. These words in Indian language culture have poor translations of equivalent words in English. As the English words like 'cousin', 'uncle', 'aunt', 'brother-in-law', 'sister-in-law', etc. have a number of corresponding words in different Indian languages, the translation of these words into Indian languages becomes ambiguous. For example, if the sentence 'My uncle is a doctor' in English is translated into Assamese, it means either my father's brother or brother-in-law, or my mother's brother or

brother-in-law is a doctor (even, an explanation like paternal uncle or maternal uncle will not do). Words like 'Samudi' in Oriya are difficult to be translated. The word is used to explain the relationship between two persons whose son and daughter are married and are husband and wife respectively. The word 'Samdhi' in Maithili like 'Samudi' in Oriya means a relationship word.

Two persons whose son/daughter are married to each other are called 'Samdhis' in both Hindhi and Maithili. For example, in the novel *The Hour before Dawn* Menoka's father is 'Samdhi' of Mohokanto's father which is not correct in Assamese. In Assamese it is 'Bioi' just as it means in Bengali. The word 'Samundhi' in Bengali means the elder brother of one's wife. Therefore, the words like 'Samudi' or his wife 'Samuduni' in Oriya give no exact equivalent words in English as two different languages do not always function alike.

In the novel *The Hour before Dawn* the relationship terms used in the ST Antoreep have been retained. The kinship terms such as 'Nobou', 'Kokaiti', 'Kokai', 'Deuta', 'Aai', 'Ma', 'Soru Ma', 'Baba', 'Pitai',

'Baideu', 'Mahi', 'Khura', 'Khuri', 'Dada', 'Bowari', 'Borpitai', 'Mami', 'Bapu', 'Maiji', 'Soru Bapu', etc. have been retained in the translated text to give the English readers the taste of Assamese flavour expressed in the SLT. But the translations of these Indian languages seem inadequate and something is missing in such translations in English. Besides, there are 'swear words' with socio-cultural background in the Indian languages which are difficult to be translated without taking the context and the whole into consideration.

There are certain words related to food which are not only the names of items but also cultural expressions which are simply untranslatable. Bertrand Russell the famous writer says that the 'non-linguistic acquaintance with cheese' cannot be interpreted to a person who has not experienced it herself/himself (Pathak 22). Similarly the Indian food words such as 'halva', 'poori', 'kheer', 'jilebi', etc. cannot be sensitively translated into 'spaghetti', 'maccheroni', 'minestrone', 'pizzas', etc. because such words simply do not have their equivalence in English and most of the times the translators of Indian literary texts into English retain these words in italics in the translated text. But a translator also needs to take a decision regarding the number of such words to be added. In *The Hour before Dawn* words such as 'khisiri' (P.3) are used but sometimes these are dropped. When Mohikanto's father Ghonokanto describes the preparations made by his father, the translator refers to these as 'delicacies' (P.169).

There are some dress-words in Indian languages which have their own cultural bearing. The translations of these dress-words appear inadequate and something is missing in such translations. The names of cloths like 'gamosa', 'sador', 'dhoti', 'kurta', 'pyjama', 'mekhela', etc. used in the novel *The Hour before Dawn* cannot be translated into English. 'Blouse' cannot be translated as 'cover shoulder'. 'Aanchal' cannot be translated into English with its cultural connotations. It is because that 'there are no exact synonyms even in the same language and its dialects and that a language is not merely a medium through which experience is communicated but is something inseparable from the experience it communicates' (Pathak 23). The duty of the translator is to bear this in mind while going ahead with the job of translating a text from the source language into the target language.

The translators of literary texts in the Indian languages into English face problems such as the problems of translating culture-based words. The culture-oriented words in the Indian literary texts such as 'Krishna', 'Hari', or 'Modon' are devoid of their culture and religious connotations when they appear in the English translation meant for non-Indian readerships. The limitation of the English language in expressing the concepts such as 'Lila' or 'abhiman' is due to the cultural differences. The translations of the words 'Love-play' for 'Lila' or 'pique' for 'abhiman' are the examples of poor translations. The 'abhiman' of Menoka the protagonist of the novel *The Hour before Dawn* can be translated neither as her 'pride' nor as her 'self respect'. But this 'abhiman' is completely comprehended by the Indian readers. The culture based words to be translated from one language belonging to a certain culture into a different language belonging to another culture make the life of the translator miserable.

Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the richness of Sanskrit and other Indian languages in erotic expressions is not matched by the English language. Therefore, 'the transcreation of Vatsyayan's

Kamasutra into English fails to carry the feel of original writing with it' (Das 39). In *The Hour before Dawn* the translator simply drops the details of Menoka's wishes where the curtailment of the details of Menoka's wish to sit in the moonlight with her wet hair and cloths is perhaps due to this reason. The Indian language cultures are rich in erotic expressions which may be interpreted in a wrong way, especially by the non-Indian English language readers.

In the case of literal translation there are certain words in English such as 'Block' referring to a 'segment of a street bounded by successive cross streets' which are difficult to be translated into English. There are

numerous words in English which became a part of our languages because the experiences and the things they referred to become a part of our life. Words like 'train,' 'station,' 'master,' 'class,' 'matriculation examination,' 'company,' 'engine,' 'hospital,' 'table,' 'hostel,' 'permission,' etc. used in both the SLT (Antoreep) and the TLT (*The Hour before Dawn*) belong to English but they have become a part of the Indian languages. There were some attempts made by translation scholars to popularise the Hindi translation of the words like 'necktie' as 'kanthlangote' or 'train' as 'lauh-path-gamini'. But these attempts remained unsuccessful as the attempt of P. Lal to translate the typical Indian language expressions such as 'tu tu mein mein' as 'you youing me meing' (Das 43). In the Book Two of the novel *The Hour before Dawn* the readers from the Indian language backgrounds can easily notice a change in the vocabulary. The words like 'overseer' (P.206), 'telegraph' (P.225), 'Sir' (P.229), 'result' (P.246), 'taxi' (P.293), etc. begin to appear frequently. The second part of the novel is devoted to the description of the life of Indro, the elder son of Menoka and Mohikanto, who goes to Kolkata for higher studies. During the 1930s and 1940s the acceptance of a large number of English words in the Indian languages was an experience shared by almost all the languages in India.

The translator translating the Indian literary texts into English finds this situation where lots of words from English becoming a part of the language of ST, complex. The need for replacement of equivalent lexical items is gone. But at the same time the translator also fails to communicate this changed vocabulary of the language of the ST. This shift in the kind of language from monolingual context to the bilingual context which also indicates the shift from a small village life to a big town life in the 1940s becomes untranslatable. The novel in translation is in a way unable to communicate this shift especially to the non-Indian readers for whom the context of this shift taking place in pre-independence India is unfamiliar.

In the case of literal translation, words such as 'sacred', communal,' or 'secular' will convey different meanings to different readers from different socio-political background. Bengali words like 'bhadralog' are not exactly equivalent to 'gentleman' in English. Even the word 'Sambhrant' from Sanskrit is neither equivalent to 'gentlemen' in English nor 'bhadralog' in Bengali. The translation of the words 'vedika' and 'toran' into English as 'railing' and 'gateways' respectively is in no way correct for 'the real sense of the original terms evaporates as soon as they are given in English' (Pathak 22).

Translation is not possible in the field of fine arts such as music, dance, painting, architecture or sculpture in the manner as it is done where the medium of the art is language. Language which makes communication possible differs from people to people, culture to culture. Translation performing its bridge building role by substituting the SL text with the TL text makes this journey of the text from one language context to another. The readers of the translated text as the translated text become aware of the features of the languages concerned in comparison to each other. In translation 'decoding and recoding, destructuring and restructuring take place. Since languages differ in form and structure, translation acts as a kind of linguistic bridge-building between two languages and cultures' (Das 68). The two-dimensional process of translation which is not unidirectional depends on the interpretation of verbal signs in the same language and also in the language different from it. 'The meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign in which it is more fully developed' (Das 69).

Swear words are also difficult to be translated. Different races have different notions of 'incest' and therefore, the intensity of the swear words can be communicated properly if the concepts of sex relationships are shared by the concerned cultures of text to be translated. The concepts of

marriage also have different implications in different cultures. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the reader finds the couple hiding the fact of their marriage from their own child and from the people of the town. But a woman who has an eighteen year old daughter (re)marries the mayor of the town in a normal way. The (re)marriage at this age will never appear normal to the Indian readers and students often get confused about the main points of secrecy in this novel. Not only different culture in different countries will find such narrative elements difficult to be translated but in some country the implication of such acts is subject to change due to the flow of time. The selling of the wife in a drunken position is such an awkward act that even though it took place in front of the people of the town it becomes simply un-reportable after a certain period of time.

In *The Hour before Dawn* Menoka's remaining in the house with full authority as the mother of her children as the daughter-in-law of her parent-in-laws and as the lady of the house and her decision to stop continuing

as the wife of Mohikanto the master of the same house is completely understood by the Indian readers. The sense of power and freedom that Menoka exercises is a peculiar feature of the Indian family structure which is not easy to be communicated to the non-Indian readers.

It is generally believed that translation of jokes is unattainable. The culture-bound expressions such as humour, especially jokes are difficult to translate from one language belonging to a certain culture into a different language belonging to another culture. The problem arises in transferring the meaning of a joke when the target language is both structurally and culturally different from the source speech and culture. The fact that humour is universal but joke is local indicates the ground for difficulties in translation of such culture-bound expressions. Only proper knowledge of the exact nature or origin of the joke helps the translator to make his task of translation possible from one language into another.

It is normally assumed that the translation of poetry is more difficult than the translation of prose because of the abundance of literary features such as simile, metaphor, irony, paradox, alliteration, etc. While translating poetry the translator should have in mind the sense that his prime duty is to translate a piece of poetry, not to re-write or produce an interpretation of it. The language of a novel is also sometimes poetic. The scenic descriptions which are used to create the poetic effect use various poetic devices. The translator needs to capture not only the semantic equivalence but also the poetic effect which is also a part of the narrative shifts.

There are 'no two languages with identical structures' and 'the inadequacy of translation' due to gender denoting words is a problem for the translators of Indian literary texts with no solution (Das 71 -72). Words such as 'student,' 'teacher,' 'professor,' 'worker,' 'doctor,' 'patient,' 'engineer,' 'legislator,' etc. do not reflect their gender distinction in English as they do in the Indian languages such as Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Maithili, or Bhojpuri:

Hindi: Meri shikshok ne mujhe saza di. Meri shikshika ne mujhe saza di.

Assamese: Mor hikkhoke mok hasti disil. Mor hikkhoitriye mok hasti disil.

These two sentences in Hindi or in Assamese cannot be translated into English as one sentence only as 'My teacher punished me.' There are no ways to avoid this ambiguity. The problems of the translators of English literary texts into the Indian languages are also very similar problems.

In spite of the threats to the authenticity and position of translation caused by the problems related to it, there is an upward trend of translation today among the scholars and translators. In spite of all the problems the task of translation will continue to be rendered by writers, scholars and translators in all ages. The role and significance of the translators who are the cultural bridge-builders will be realized by all generations.

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