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Linguistic and Cultural Aspects in Translating Manipuri to English: An Analysis of Irabot's Poems

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Abstract: To translate a literary work and to successfully transplant the culture of the source language to the target language is not an easy task. There are lexical complexities in translation which are difficult in translating idiomatic expressions, certain collocations, meaning of which is contextual, and to present an exact image, symbol, conceit or pun which are there in the source language. As language is culturally bound, translating a text steeped in one culture into another culture will no doubt raise problems. An attempt has been made to translate a literary work in Manipuri to English. The paper will focus on the process of translation and the challenges faced by the researcher. It will also investigate whether adhering strictly to all the basic rules of translation is possible or not.

Keywords: intralingual translation, interlingual translation, transference inter-semiotic translation, lexicon, close approximation, lexis, code-units.

Introduction

In translation, we need to consider both cultural and linguistic aspects. No two languages are identical in meaning or in sentence structure or in the use of symbols. So, an absolute correspondence between the two languages in case of translation is not possible. According to Roman Jakobson (2000), "... the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign..." (114). For him, there are three kinds of translation: intralingual translation, interlingual translation and inter-semiotic translation (114). Intralingual translation or rewording involves the translation of signs to other signs of the same language which can be synonyms of the word or rephrasing of sentences. Interlingual translation or translation proper is the translation of "verbal signs" into other language, inter-semiotic translation or transmutation is the interpretation of "verbal signs" into non-verbal ones. By translation, most of us generally refer to interlingual translation. In interlingual translation, no exact "equivalence" of the "code-units" is there but messages of one "code-unit" are conveyed in an alien code-unit.

Cultural aspects in translation include lexical context and syntax, ideologies and ways of life in a given culture. Newmark defines culture as "...the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression..." (1988, 94). According to Eugene Nida (1964), there are two opposing aspects of translation which are formal-equivalence (F-E) translation and dynamic-equivalence (D-E) translation. F-E translation focuses on form while D-E translation gives more emphasis to context. Both have its merits and demerits. The two challenges in D-E translation are grammar and lexicon. Here, grammar can still be adjusted but not lexicon. For translating a lexical item, three things are to be considered which are:-

- 1) Whether the parallel words are available
- 2) Whether the terms have culturally different lexis which can still carry similar functions if not the cultural meaning
- 3) Terms which are culturally bound

To these challenges Nida (1964) opines that a translated work can avoid certain lexis to adjust the message of the context but it can also incorporate certain elements which can provide “the proper emotional tone” of the original work. On translation of cultural words and notions, Newmark (1988) comes up with two methods which are opposite to each other. The two opposing methods are transference and componential analysis. Transference keeps cultural norms and concepts thus giving ‘cultural colour’. However, this method might limit the readers and might not be comprehensible to all. So, he prefers componential analysis which excludes the culture and highlights the message (Anica 2010).

Language and Culture

Language is a complex phenomenon which may or may not fully produce the ideas or inner states. According to Gasset (1937), language differentiates us because not only we speak different languages but because our thoughts come from “... different mental pictures, from disparate intellectual systems... from divergent philosophies...” (59). He further expresses his views that translation should not attempt to duplicate the original text; rather it should be treated as a literary genre and again as an apparatus that leads to the creation of another work. What he appears to opine is that a translated work can never be the same to the original work. However, Nida (1964) has opposing views to the above mentioned. For him, a translated work should have close approximation with the original one in terms of form and context. The customs, traditions, manner of thought and means of expression of the source text should be conveyed in the target work as much as possible. It should fulfil the same purpose and produce the same response of the source text. In short, it should have the feel of the original work. So, translation should be characterised by “naturalness of expression” and that it should relate to the culture of the “receptor”

According to Venuti (1995), a translator looks for similarities in language and culture between the two languages and what he frequently comes across is dissimilarities. He should not try to remove the dissimilarities entirely but it should be presented in such a way that the readers get to know the cultural otherness of the source text. Again, the

readers should be reminded of the gaps which are unbridgeable and the gains and losses associated to it.

Limitations in Translation

There is no exact equivalence between two different languages. Thus, limitations have to be there in translation. To Gasset (1937), the limitations are the irreducible differences not only in linguistics but also in cultures. According to Nida (1964), Dynamic- Equivalence (D-E) translation has three major limitations which are:

- 1) Special literary forms like poetry which rhythmic forms, puns, simile, metaphor cannot be translated or adjusted easily
- 2) Semantically exocentric expressions cannot be translated literally and sometimes adjustments made to idioms in one language may distort the meaning.
- 3) Intraorganismic meanings i.e. to translate lexis and lexical phrases which are culture specific and are not readily translatable into other culture.
(Nida 1964)

Translation of poetry

To translate a literary work, particularly poetry of a different culture, is very difficult. Again, a poet when he writes does not directly write what he wants to say. He will play with the language using literary techniques and figure of speech. To translate these kinds of work even in the same language is difficult unless one understands what the writer means. In addition to this, conflict arises on whether form should be maintained or context. Strict adherence to form can make the work meaningless and only consideration of form can make the literary work mediocre and plain. So, a balance should be maintained. However, if meaning and style do not conform, meaning should be given priority. Different opinions have been given by many linguists regarding translation of poetry.

According to Gasset (1937), for a poetic work, "...translation is no more than an apparatus, a technical device that brings us closer to the work without ever trying to repeat or replace it" (61).

For Jackson Mathews (1959), translation of a poem is like to compose a new poem which has the context of the original but also has the voice of the translator (67).

William A. Cooper (1928) views that if the figure of speech of the original poem is not translatable, the poem should be written in a different figure and language while retaining the spirit and the theme of the original (484).

According to Roman Jakobson (2000), poetry is constructed in a different morphological and syntactic way. He says, "...poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible..." (117)

Research Statement

Keeping in mind the above discussed views, definitions and challenges in translation in linguistic and cultural level, the researcher attempts to translate two poems of Hijam Irabot in Manipuri language into English and discuss the various challenges faced in the process of translation.

Translating Irabot's "Emagi Puja" and "12th December"

Hijam Irabot is a poet, social reformer and revolutionist. During his lifetime, he protested against every form of injustice. He fought against the prevalent social taboos then and against consideration of Western education as impure. His works include *Lokmanya Tilak*, *Seidam Seireng*, and *Joymati* (drama). He started "Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahashabha" in 1934 with Maharaj Churachand, the then king of Manipur as Chairperson. The Shabha aimed to consolidate the Meiteis who were scattered in the South East Asia. He again renamed it as "Nikhil Manipur Mahashabha" in 1938. Due to his social activities, he was put in jail for three years in Sylhet jail in 1940. He wrote *Emagi Puja*, a collection of 49 poems while he was in jail in Sylhet, Bangladesh. His revolutionary activities started from this jail. But after his release, he was not allowed to enter Manipur yet; he continued his activities and died in Burma.

Irabot's "Emagi Puja" and "12th December" are among the well known poems in Manipuri literature. These poems are from the collection of Irabot's poems titled *Emagi Puja* which was published posthumously in 1987. The poem "Emagi Puja" consists of twelve stanzas in which each stanza has six lines and these six lines compose one sentence. That means each stanza is actually a sentence. The rhyme scheme of the twelve stanzas of the poem is "aabbbbcccccc". While translating this poem, difficulty starts with the title itself. The title "Emagi Puja" comprises of two words where 'Emagi' means 'Mother's' and 'Puja' means 'Prayer' or 'Devotion'. So, the literal meaning has to be 'Mother's prayer' or 'Mother's devotion'. But the title, according to the context of the poem means the yearning of a child for his mother's love from whom he was parted very early. So, considering that the English translation has to be 'For Mother's Love'. The other poem, in Manipuri is titled "December 12" which is the way of saying a date in Manipuri while it is written in its translation as 12th December in the English way.

Challenges in the process of translation

Translation is never a smooth process. One is bound to face difficulties, dissimilarities which are hard to adjust and lexical complexities. In the poem "Emagi Puja", each stanza is a sentence and the first six stanzas are all written as interrogatives. Again, the beginning four stanzas are 'wh-type' interrogative sentences and the fifth and sixth are rhetorical questions. Normally, in Manipuri, the 'wh-word' occupies the last part of the sentence which is the opposite of English. In English 'wh-word' always starts the interrogative sentence. So, the researcher translates each stanza not in a single sentence but in two or more sentences. Here, the wh-sentence occupies the last two lines of each stanza.

There are some phrases which corresponding lexis are difficult to find in English. For instance, the phrase 'Ahoi Ahoiana' which in the poem signifies the continuous burning i.e. the pain inside the poet for his mother's absence. This phrase acts as an adverb to the progressive verb 'burning' which exact correspondence in English is hard to find. So, the researcher avoids this phrase. The word 'Tangloul' means 'mid-night' and 'Thenglaba' means 'late'. In the poem the phrase 'Thenglaba

Tanglou' would mean 'late mid-night' which is not normally used in English. The word 'mid-night' will signify 'late in night'. For this reason, the researcher avoids the lexis 'thenglaba' in the translation. This avoidance of lexis for the context and to avoid repetition is supported by Nida (1964) as discussed earlier.

In the poem, the poet has employs the word 'murthy' three times. The literal meaning of the word is 'statue' but this does not fit in the context of the poem. So, other similar words like 'Image' and 'Symbol' are used responding to the theme of the poem. On the other hand there are also usage of different synonymous words of 'mother' in the poem such as 'Palem', 'Apokpi' and 'Ema'. However, in the translated work only one word i.e. 'mother' substitutes all. Hence, the researcher uses different corresponding words for one word or one corresponding word for different words.

Then, there is this line 'Machagi pothafam' which means 'a place where child rests'. This syntax seems prosaic to fit in a work of poetry. Because of this, another phrase 'Near her breast' is used which goes well with the preceding lines in the 8th stanza.

*She held me lovingly
Near her breast
Fed me her milk
Milk that nourishes children*

Again, the Meitei belief in birth and rebirth is reflected in the poem when he says, 'Mapok asigi Palemndo' i.e. 'mother of this birth' which is difficult to grasp by a reader of other culture which does not share the same idea.

In the poem "12th December", what does this 12th of December means would not be known to one who is not from Manipur or one who does not know the history of Manipur. So, the researcher, in the translated version, has to put notes in the end to describe what this date stands for. This was the day when women of Manipur fought against the government due to inflation in 1904 and again in 1939. That is why the poet says:

*One 12th of December is gone,
Comes another 12th December*

For the word 'Devi', the researcher has simply chooses 'woman' as its correspondence. Actually 'Devi' is a loan word in Manipuri and it is used in addressing a woman with respect the exact correspondence of which in English is not easy to find or usage of other phrases like 'respected lady' would make the translated work too decorative. In 'Yes/No' type questions in Manipuri, there is no subject. It is normally written in 'verb-complement/adverbials- interrogative words'. In its translation to English where this structure is not there, one has to paraphrase it and put it in a usual 'Yes/No' type form of sentence with a subject to avoid ambiguity. The addition of lexical items when some grammatical category is absent is suggested by Jakobson (1969). For instance, the last lines of the poem read as follows:

*Do you believe you have to tie your hair?
Do you suppose this day will come?*

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is found that adherence to some of the rules put forth by many linguists are indeed helpful. But making the work comprehensible and to carry the feel and culture of the source text lies mostly in the hand of the researcher. So, strict adherence might betray the meaning of the original work. Again, the challenges can be summed up as

- ❖ Division of a complex sentence into two or more sentences
- ❖ Position of 'wh-word'
- ❖ Absence of corresponding lexis
- ❖ Avoidance of redundant or too decorative words
- ❖ Different corresponding words for one word or vice versa
- ❖ Culture specific event or beliefs
- ❖ Use of lexical items in absence of grammatical item

As claimed by many linguists that it is an impossible task to translate a poem because of many barriers like inability to form the same rhythm, rhyme scheme, use of simile or metaphor and the same colloquial form. What one can do is to transpose it into a new poem

which has the context, if not the form. To do justice both to form and context is not possible. So, no utopian endeavour has been made to create a poem that has the same metrical pattern or the same style. But, an attempt has been made to carry the same vigour, the universal love of mother, the undeterred courage of women, the essence of poetry, and the exposition of ordinary and mundane ideas in a beautiful way. It is said that a translated work can never be the same with the original, yet translated works flourish. Although there are many complexities in it, yet people keep on translating works to share what the translators had felt while reading that work with others. Hence, the researcher attempts to share, if not the smooth flow of the words, consonance in the poem, but the beauty, the yearning for mother, the image of a loving mother, the rebellion of women for a social cause which transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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APPENDIX – I:

Emagi Puja (For Mother's Love)

In the Tranquil Night,
In the Mid-night,
 In the Serene Moonlight,
 A soft soothing Voice,
 Is calling – Mother
 Who is he?

Is he a friend of mine,
Sharing the same fate,
 Sharing Sleeplessness,
 Remembering and Reminding.
 Who are you?
 Who is calling for Mother?

Do you feel the same pain?
Is it burning in you,
 The wild forest fire?
 Its unbearable anguish
 To not know Thy Mother.
 Is that why You are calling for Mother?

To get to call “Mother”
Is a blessing of God.
 You, who is not blessed,
 Are you like me?
 Is that why
 You are calling for Mother?

The way a mother calls,
The love she bestows,
 “My Dear Child”
 You, too, don't get.
 You are still calling.
 Are you heard?

To be lovingly soothed,
“My Precious Child
 Mother is here, I am here”
 Heard it long time ago,
 Do you, who are calling – Mother?

Are you heard?

Oh! You Unlucky.

In your Dream,

 You saw your mother

 Of this Life.

 Hidden, it is hidden,

 Her Image.

She held me lovingly

Near her breast.

 Fed me her Milk,

 Milk that nourishes us

 Didn't get much, didn't get much

 Her milk.

Kissing my forehead,

My ugly forehead

 Told me those soothing words

 "Mother is here, My Child"

 I still heard

 Her Voice.

Only then did I smile

Jot down with a pen

 Calling her name

 Which I never get in this birth

 "Mother, Mother"

 Thy name, I keep on calling.

Goddess of Heaven

Symbol of Kindness

 Because of My Fate

 Parted with your Child.

 Oh! The Image

 Which I call Mother.

Deep down my heart,

Painted with eternal colour

 With care painted You

 Which I won't stop gazing

 Your Face

 Oh! Mother.

(Translated by Chingtham Diana Devi)

APPENDIX – II:

12th December

The night is over;
The day is spent.
Tie your hair woman
Your dishevelled hair.
One 12th December is gone;
Comes another 12th December—
Have you forgotten?
Do you believe you have to tie your hair?
Do you suppose this day will come?

(Translated by Chingtham Diana Devi)

Note: 12th December stands for the day when women of Manipur stood and struggled against the then government protesting against the inflation in 1904 and 1939. This day is commemorated as *Nupilal* in Manipur every year.