Translating the Oral: Translatability and Cultural Dynamics*

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Abstract: The present paper seeks to examine the theoretical problematics of translatability that arises in translating the oral into a target language (here English). Even if we overcome the problem of translatability there are other critical areas which need to be examined such as cultural specificity and the context of the folk. As a folk text is perpetually displaced and translation as such is provisional, the problem of standardization and interpretation remain areas of critical concern. As good translation endures and bad translation withers away what role do institutions such as a University department of Translation Studies or Folklore and an organization like the Sahitya Akademi play in producing meaningful, readable translation of the oral, working towards a post-colonial archive of the folk that is crucial in terms of cultural identity and cultural specificity in the contemporary context.

(Note: I have used oral and folk interchangeably in this paper.)

A few years back, I organized a translation workshop at the Ura Academy, Kohima on behalf of Katha, a Delhi-based organization, at the forefront of promoting quality translation across the country. The workshop theme was how to translate effectively the Tenyidie oral literature into English. During the workshop we got stuck at not being able to crack a culture – specific word that connoted the way a shawl has to be worn. Dr. Shürhozelie, presently the minister of education of Nagaland, came to our rescue and explained the practice by demonstrating how the shawl had to be worn by a person who had earned a certain

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status in the community. He added that no else could wear the shawl in that manner, and the person who has earned the status could not wear the shawl differently as it would mean an insult to the tradition. In my view, this incident is profound in its cultural context. On the one hand it can be connected to cultural specificity and on the other to particularity of cultural identity and problems of translatability. Interestingly, what Dr. Shürhozelie knows is already lost to others simply because such a practice does not exist.

This anecdote would be of great significance if we consider translation as an activity that is not concerned only with transferring/transliterating the source text into a target language but also an activity that involves inter-cultural negotiation. The point that I’m trying to make here is that demonstrating a practice is one thing but translating the word that connotes that practice into another language adequately, carrying the ritual-cultural meaning of that word in the absence of an equivalent word, is another matter all together. One may argue that leaving the original as it is in translation and supporting it with a gloss or note would be enough. But I’m sceptical of the suggestion. A gloss or note may not adequately explain the deeper meaning of an expression if we don't create a context around it. Creating a context requires that the linguistic transfer of the source text needs much more than is generally talked about. This, I think, is immensely important. It is necessary to ask: How do we deal with the imperatives of translation as a practice, particularly in the context of translating the oral?

Translation and Translatability
Translation, as a discourse, has been subjected to plural theoretical speculations both as a process as well as a product. Between the twin positions that Spivak underlines (1) “translation is necessary and impossible” and (2) “translation is necessary and unavoidable” (2005:238), we have to consider translation as a “contact zone” that has in the post-colonial context grown out of colonial domination and has been characterized by “conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1992:6). There are many views and perspectives on translation that may be examined within these horizons that seem to be both interminable as well terminable. The practice of translation in a traditional sense underlines the importance of fidelity to the source text within four types of equivalence: linguistic (word for word), paradigmatic (at the level of grammar), stylistic (where meaning must remain identical), and textual (at the level of shape and form) (Niranjana 1995:57). Constituted in these operational conventions, translation also operates within or beyond some epistemological horizons developed by different theorists. In the pre-modern era, translation was primarily a
process of domination and appropriation. Later translation as a product of Western epistemic tradition and under colonialism, appropriated the native knowledge and narratives, recasting the same with the objective of what a Western reader expects or would like to read. Not only were constructs such as barbaric, primitive, effeminate etc. attributed to the native, it went up to the extent of sermonizing that “India must discard her Indianness in order to become civilized” (James Mill cited in Niranjana 1995:58). This view came to a crisis in the wake of decolonization and post-modernity and has dethroned the ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism of the Western tradition. Translation as a transcendent real is substituted with the notion of not only translating texts into a target language, or as a process happening only between two languages, but also understanding the process as an inter-cultural negotiation. The latter has put the onus of responsibility on the native-translator, for she/he has to undertake translation without harbouring any essentialist position being constituted within his/her language and culture.

Walter Benjamin’s opinion on translation holds forth in our context in looking at the vulnerability of the task. Considering translation as a ‘mode’ Benjamin maintains:

Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law for governing the translation: its translatability. The question is whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it? In principle, the first question can be decided only contingently; the second, however, apodictically (1968a:70 emphases added).

In Benjamin’s understanding, the centrality of translation depends on the law of its governability that brings into focus the very process of ‘translatability.’ The condition of translatability, according to Benjamin, is subjected to contingency and apodicticity or necessity. Hence, translation as a process as well as a discourse derives from the ‘mode’, it follows or the ‘form’ it takes. Is translation then limited by its mode? It is difficult to ascertain this since the very mode of translation is always provisional. It is also open-ended as it expresses “an infinity of meanings, from beatitude to despair – always the same and always another – A form which temporarily contains the formless, revealing it constantly at work” (Nouss 2005:225). Thus, the autonomy of the mode remains illusive and contentious. Radhakrishnan maintains: “Tautonomy of the mode is in fact heteronomous, for, a mode also has to be a mode of
something prior. This heteronomy is legitimately sanctioned by way of a quality called ‘translatability’, a characteristic intrinsic to the original and thereby made available as the first principle that will govern the project of translation. Quite the dangerous supplement, à la Derrida, and not quite the acquiescent commentary that ‘comes after’ in a spirit of apostolic secondarity, as a mode teases out of, to borrow from Edward Said, ‘the linguiocity’ (1975: 340) of the original something called ‘translatability’”(Radhakrishnan 2009:282). The concept of ‘translatability’ always connects to something that is original – a before, and to something that follows – an after, a translated text. Whether the act of translation is to follow the source text faithfully or not, carry out linguistic transfer into the target language transparently and meaningfully or not, maintaining the equivalence which would mean doing proper anu-bad as it were in the Indian sense or not, the fact remains that the totality of the source text escapes its materiality (i.e language, style, form etc.) in translation both in the case of a written text as well as a folk text.

Textuality and the Oral/Folk Text
The folk text carries the inscriptions of cultural coding in the form of myths, legends, symbols, fantasy and dreams of the source culture. The load of textual assemblages and identities of the source text as deep inscriptions may not be translated in its totality into the target language. This is where translating the oral or folk has its own problems, being hugely different from translating a written text. It is not only a question of translatability alone but also the textuality of the oral text that is important, because it is perpetually displaced. Textual displacement of the folk is obvious as there are many versions of the same narrative; there are variations of the text based on its source and plurality in performance and rituals in case of performative texts. Apart from these problems, the mnemocultural anxiety often inveighs the folk text in accepting its plural reproduction by different folklorists who collect it from the field. Even if we accept the so-called standardized version, the act of translation of the folk has to be alert to its post-colonial context.

Folk literature that has been produced by colonial anthropologists and ethnographers are products of the Western paradigm in which the subject people were described as they were seen or seen to have behaved. There is a huge gap between the cultural meaning of a word/ expression and the way it is translated. This argument bears on the Orientalism produced in the translations of William Jones and his tribe. Post-colonial translation theory has to deconstruct this model and work towards redefining translation in its own terms. Tejaswini Niranjana raises an important issue by stating: “The intimate links between, for
example, translations from non-Western languages into English and the colonial hegemony they helped create are seldom examined (1995:58). Although Louis Kelly remarks that “the Americans developed translation theory in the context of anthropological research and Christian Missionary activity; the English to fit the needs of colonial administration,” he does not necessarily use the observation to initiate a critique of either colonialism or translation theory” (Niranjana 1995:58). Absence of such a critique is the core problem when we explore the imperatives of translating the folk or oral narratives from Northeast India. One such imperative is the dependence on the bilingual dictionaries compiled by the Missionaries of different tribal languages in Northeast; in many cases these dictionaries are not revised at all and there are no alternative dictionaries to fall upon, to compare and match the meanings of a word or expression.

Beyond the problematic of colonial epistemic violence and re-describing ourselves outside of European ethnocentrism, we need to think of alterity as a means of empowerment which would help in retranslating our own texts. Both translation and re-translation need to happen for producing the post-colonial folk knowledge. This alterity cannot be converted into a table of different sets as an oppositional practice to the colonial mode but remarking reading differences of cultural practices. As Nouss maintains, it is necessary to understand that “Between the original and the translation, there does not exist a space which is neutral ...” (Nouss 2005:225). The ‘and’ in translation that connects a prior to an after does take some concrete shape both within and outside language. To further explain my point, I would recall the anecdote. With the non-verbal demonstration of how a shawl has to be worn that is outside language, a prior that seeks an after in translation in selecting the appropriate metaphor, thereby bringing the non-verbal into the materiality of language. The problem is further complicated by our interpretation and understanding of a source metaphor, gesture and practice or a text. A source text evolves in meaning after having been put through ideological, cultural, socio-political interrogation. Hence, its translation also seeks a certain emphasis as the translator would think appropriate. This is where I think it is apt to cite the example of the translation of Fakir Mohan Senapati’s (an Oriya and a pioneering Indian vernacular novelist) novel Chhaman Attha Guntha. This novel has undergone three translations by different hands. The recent one by five translators, titled as Six Acres and a Third is claimed to be the best of all so far translated and published by California University Press. Interestingly, the team includes an English speaking Canadian who knows Oriya and four translators from Orissa, one among them being an academic-scholar
teaching at Cornell University. It is interesting to note the reaction to this translation:

Fakir Mohan Senapati’s Oriya novel, Chha Mana Atha Guntha (1902) constitutes a curious case in the history of translation of Indian fiction in English. It had three English versions published between 1967 and 1969 (Das, C.V. Narasimha 1967; Senapati B.M. & Senapati A.M. 1967; Misra, Nuri 1969), one version differing radically from another in its presentation of the text. The translators of two versions have changed the title and presented their versions as ‘rewritten’ in English, and further, one translator presented it as a Victorian English novel, embellishing it with epigraphs in the form of quotations from English classics at the head of each chapter and including in the body of translation references to English literature which are absent from the original text (for a comparative study of the three translations, see Sherry Simon & Paul St-Pierre 2000: 263-288)... Such a strategy of translation, which is closer to rewriting, raises crucial questions about authorship, loyalty and authenticity. The ‘colonial cringe’ demonstrated by the translator also acts against the very purpose of literary translation, namely, introducing a foreign text and culture to the readers in the target language. One hopeful thing, however, is that, located as we are, at the post colonial moment of stringent copyright laws, contemporary translators cannot do whatever they wish with an author’s text (Translation Today, Volume 3 No.1&2 Mar & Oct 2006: 3).

The questions raised by M. Asaduddin are complex and also pertinent particularly in case of retranslating earlier translations. Such acts are far removed from the process of translation. There are other aspects as well which also necessitate fresh translations after objectively analysing the limitations of the earlier ones. Further, a point that has to be noted is that a source text does not change but what changes is its interpretation and understanding over the course of time. Hence there is a need for fresh translation that underlines alterity as a mode that is part of an ongoing process of linguistic and cultural changes and transformations. The source text does not reveal all its secrets at any given moment of interpretation. Thus, translating a source text is an effort in deeper understanding and interpretation. Only then can the narrative action in which the human is predicated come to metaphoric concretisation. Multiple translations of Senapati’s novel are an apt example to reflect on some of the translations produced of Northeast folk tales already done by the British and retranslated by local scholars. In fact some of these (re)
translations are quite bad and derivative in most cases. Although such translations have brought in laurels in some cases, they deserve to be analysed and exposed. This is one of the dangers we face in the absence of any institutional approach to the problem.

The Post-colonial Folklorist-Translator

We need to situate the post-colonial Folklorist-Translator in this context. Who is he/she; what is his/her location? A folk text is converted into a written one by the folklorist after being collected from the field. Such a text thus carries some subjectivity of the folklorist in the way she/he has understood and recorded the rendition. In translation, without debating over the authenticity of the original in the folklorist version, we may accept it as the given source text. The post-colonial folklorist-translator faces an uphill task in defining his/her position. There is a very real possibility of being influenced by the existing colonial paradigm as we have internalized it in our educational training. Besides the trained folklorists, there are a number of amateurs in the field. How do we then respond to their texts and their translations? In the absence of a theoretical framework before the folklorist and tools for sustained interrogation of the folk texts for bringing them into coherence and integrity, most of us are still on the path of taking folklore as a mode of discovery and as exotica. This quixotic approach may not be a healthy practice. Translation is also considered by some as a process of discovery. But these positions don’t serve the purpose of criticality, as we ponder over methodologies and theories of both translation and folklore.

The folklorist-translator as a subject is implicated in both the acts: Creating the folk text as well as translating the same into the target language. The post-colonial folklorist-translator is also part of two linguistic cultures; his/her native language and English. In the contemporary theoretical context, the folklorist-translator as the producer of two ‘texts’ is beyond the theoretical speculation of “the death of the author.” In case of the folk, the originator of the so-called original text, producing it from memory being retold over and over is supposedly anonymous. It is brought to life in its written form by the folklorist. But translation is signed under a name, thereby recognizing the author of that text hence “it would be possible to resuscitate, for translation, the notion of the ‘work’, which would imply recognition of a paternity” (Nouss 2005:226). This is an identity that is plural and in the post-colonial context problematic with multiple affiliations. As the folklorist-translator navigates between two languages and cultures, gaps between hierarchies and structures are obvious. In view of the complexity; the act of translation has to be an in-between act besides the dichotomies and ideologies of the ‘source’ and the ‘target’.
Conclusion

One needs to work out the in-between position with responsibility to one’s own culture and reflexively work with the target language and culture in order to minimize the gaps. For such a thing to happen, the folklorist–translator has to understand the cultural-ritual context in which the folklore is produced, and only then should attempt translation, minimising the loss of cultural meaning. For this to happen we need to standardise some of our methodologies and redefine the terms of translation. Only then it is possible to connect the field to publication.

It is in this context that the University departments of Folklore and Translation Studies have to play a major role in producing, standardising and providing the intellectual and cultural contexts for folklore studies as well as translation. The folk is our heritage and treasure. More needs to be done for its promotion with responsibility and clear objectives.

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References


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