

**EMERGING LITERATURES AND SOCIO-CULTURAL
UNTRANSLATABILITY**

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Abstract

The south Asian literature of the recent past and present has been contributing to the chief canon of the world literature and at the same time emerging as one of the major literatures with its distinctive socio-cultural and geographical features. This literature is produced and producing into more than thousand varied languages spoken in the south Asia. The translation is working as a bridge of communication between heterogeneous languages and cultures. The native literatures of south Asia – Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Shri Lanka, Nepal and others – have acquired popularity on the world level through the medium of translation. The role of translation has become an inevitable and as significant as creative writing. Translation became the voice of the native literatures like Marathi, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Afghan, Nepali, Lankan, etc. in the south Asia. The expansion of translation activities in the field of literature has gained a powerful status with its emerging theories. The research activities in this area have commenced throwing focus on the problems of translation. The area of translation is so vast that cannot be covered in one research paper and hence the examples are taken from literature in Indian languages. The present paper is an exploration of the problems of translation particularly socio-cultural untranslatability.

Keywords: *translation, translation equivalence, culture, socio-cultural equivalence, untranslatability, language varieties,*

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According to Krishnaswami and others, 'Language and society are so intertwined that it is impossible to understand one without the other. There is no human society that does not depend upon, is not shaped by, and does not itself shape language.' (13). Human being, society, culture and language are inseparable ingredients to each-other. A person cannot be separated from all these ingredients. As wo/man is a social animal, s/he has created various types of societies on the earth. Every society is distinct (in many respects) to the other. It has its own way of living with various traditions and ethics. And it also has its own culture. In general, society and culture has been defined as a way of living of a community of the people living together. Culture, being one of the complex phenomenon, for Clifford, it is:

'The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially the semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has himself spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.' (Qtd. Sturge 06).

And in translation search of meaning is the central task caught in the web of cultural factors. SL cultural perspective sometimes, contradict to TL cultural perspective signifying translator's perspective.

With the emergence of Cultural Studies as a distinct branch of humanities, the thought of culture embedded first in language and then in translation appeared on the scene. There are many social traditions and sometimes situations which are just untranslatable, e.g. in India there are many festivals, in fact every social or religious group has its own festivals which can

only be described in the TL but cannot be produced verbally; take the festival of Holi. It can be described as the festival of colours in India, but the whole theme and scene is not captured in this description; because the festival has different types of conventions and shades in different parts of India and also it varies from society to society. Festivals reflect culture of a society.

Many times, the social or cultural item of the SL is absent in TL, there comes untranslatability. Nida (1975) has discussed about cultural untranslatability in determining semantic equivalence as ecology, material, culture, religious culture and linguistic culture are responsible to pose the problem of socio-cultural equivalence. Take for example the word “Gokul”; it is a name of a holly place in northern India located on the banks of Yamuna River; for Indians the place is familiar and carries a lot of cultural references—a place where Lord Krishna spent his childhood. As Gokul is the unique place and has socio-cultural connotations, it is impossible to find in target culture and so in TL.

Edwin Gentzler (2001) paid attention to the recent development shifts in translation theory of culture. According to the most important shifts in theoretical developments in translation over the past two decades have been the shift from source-oriented theories to target-text-oriented theories and the shift to include cultural factors as well as linguistic elements in the translation training models. Those functionalist approaches have been pioneers in both areas. Thus, theoretical base of translation has been changed or turned to culture specific linguistic elements. The analysis of social and cultural equivalence plays a pivotal role in establishing a distinct area in the process of translating. It is required that the items related to social and cultural investigation should be treated individually so that it will help a translator to form a meaningful TL text even in culture-specific language difficulties. And language also must be treated in its entirety.

Language is comprised of varieties as dialect, register, idiolect, accent, style, native, non-native, etc. are born out of society, culture and geographical situations. It is often argued that should dialect or register be translated into

standard version of a language? The argument has individual opinions in this regard. It is depend on the translator and some extent readers what to choose. Dialects are classified into social dialect, geographical dialect, regional dialect, cultural dialect, etc. In the country like India, social stratification creates various dialects; e.g. caste dialect, class dialect, rural dialect, urban dialect, etc. These dialects are sociolects. An example of dialect of English is Cockney English and of Marathi, Marathi spoken in Marathwada, Vidarbha, Konkan and West Maharashtra. Dialects change with social class, education, age, gender, ethnic background, etc. The other specific factors style, jargon, diglossia, register, accent and idiolect also pose the problems in translating.

Kinship terms are created in social and cultural context of a language hence differs from language to language. In India, there is more specification of kinship terms than English, e.g. in Marathi 'Mama' is 'mother's brother' and 'Kaka' is 'father's brother' but in English, there is only 'uncle' for both terms. Accurate translation of kinship terms is very difficult:

'Because kinship terms articulate a specific structure which is, if at all, only minimally shared between different societies, putting them into English immediately confronts the writer with doubts about translatability. As Rosman and Rubel explain, the first difficulty arises when collecting information on kinship terms, especially if English prompts are used. For example, the word for 'father's sister's son' may elicit the local language translation of 'father's sister's son' rather than the lexical item which would be used for this category in the local language itself. It is also problematic to translate categories into English categories which are quite differently structured.' (Sturge 21).

Each and every language has its own terminology of emotions to express and most of the time such terms cannot be translated. There is again, differentiation among languages regarding sex/ taboo terms:

'And therefore many well-documented cases of sex-related differences in the literature, which do not necessarily reflect the

same attitudes towards social status or male and female roles as do the sex-related differences that exist in our own society. The relation between language-variation and its social correlates is such that broad generalizations in terms of variables like sex, age and social class soon give way, in particular instances, to more detailed and more interesting statements which make reference to the structure of different societies and to the attitudes (i.e. to the culture) of their members.' (Lyons 274).

The classification of these terms is based on socio-cultural attitudes, age, sex, class, etc. of the member of a society. Culture specific figures and images are very difficult to render into another language and culture. For instance, in Marathi, we do not have figure like Santa Claus or name or a word for this figure. Polestar is used as an image in India which is based on an ancient story of a boy called Dhruva and the star is called 'Dhruvtara'. The vocabulary also differs in languages. Eskimo has many words for different types of snow but not single word as 'snow'. In Australian languages there is no word for 'sand' but several words for various kinds of sand. (Lyons). Colours are culturally en/coded. It represents a particular meaning in a specific culture. Direct translation of colour terms, most of the time, do not correspond to each-other:

'It is also well known that, independently of this fact, word-for-word translation of colour terms across language is frequently impossible because no word in the one corresponds exactly to a word in the other. For example, there is no word in French that covers exactly what 'brown' does in English; there is no single word in Russian, Spanish or Italian that corresponds to 'blue'; no single word in Hungarian that corresponds to 'red'; and so on... Finally there are many everyday uses of colour-terms—and not only the most obviously symbolic (white for purity, red for danger, black for mourning, etc.)—which are culture-dependent, in the sense that one cannot acquire them without simultaneously acquiring the relevant social knowledge.' (Lyons 213, 216).

Colours also are used as symbols—personal as well as universal—can pose a greater problem before a translator. Every society has its own festivals, rituals and traditions rooted in the culture. In India, there are plenty of festivals representing a particular society or community. There are differences in the festivals, rituals and traditions as per religion, caste, creed, class, social status, etc. Obviously the vocabulary and terms varies; e.g. marriage is a ceremony, its concept, rituals (involved in it) and traditions differ as per religion, region, caste, creed or sect, class, etc. Many languages use honorific terms to address a person. Many Indian languages have a rich set of honorific pronouns and titles; e.g. Hindi and Marathi. These honorific terms are not present in all the languages. In English we do not have honorific pronouns as we have in Hindi and Marathi. Culture and social parameters determine the honorific titles.

Metaphors are highly culture specific can pose problems of transferring from one language and culture to another. There are many other socio-culture specific grey areas which cannot be translated in TL, e.g. idioms, phrases, proverbs, etc. Idioms and phrases are born out of the socio-cultural environment.

There are immense types of food and drinking items found on varied geographical and socio-cultural area which may pose problems to translate. Take example of India only—in south India, we have more popular items like Idali, Dosa, Uttappa, Rassam, etc. which cannot be accurately translated into other languages like Marathi or Hindi. Or we have Marathi item Bhakari which again is difficult to translate into other languages—English. Basically, these items are to be transliterated and notes of meaning should be provided for these items. Many languages use honorific terms to address a person. These are the main areas of social and cultural untranslatability and these can be diagrammatized as social and cultural equivalences which cause to form difficulties before a translator.

SCEs (social and cultural equivalences) are divided into two broad categories—restricted and non-restricted. Restricted category includes dialect, register, accent; idiolect and diglossia directly belong to language and hence

linguistic elements. Non-restricted types deal with kinship, emotion terms, sex/taboo terms, cultural figures, images, festivals, rituals, traditions, honorific terms, cultural metaphors, idioms, phrases, etc. which directly do not belong to linguistic variation as restricted types do. This distinction is made for understanding sake showing a clear bifurcation among various SCEs. The said categorization is not a strict one which does not include or exclude another element. It is a flexible one which can include or exclude any element referring to SCEs. It is a representative categorization or types indicating a direction and widening the scope of the area of translation equivalence. We have many same categories or types which can be grouped under more than one equivalence type—e.g. grammatical equivalence can be studied under stylistic equivalence, semantic equivalence and linguistic equivalence. A very strict line of differentiation is difficult to mark among equivalence types; but it is useful to find out the root of difficulties in translating. SCEs are presented in the form of the diagram:

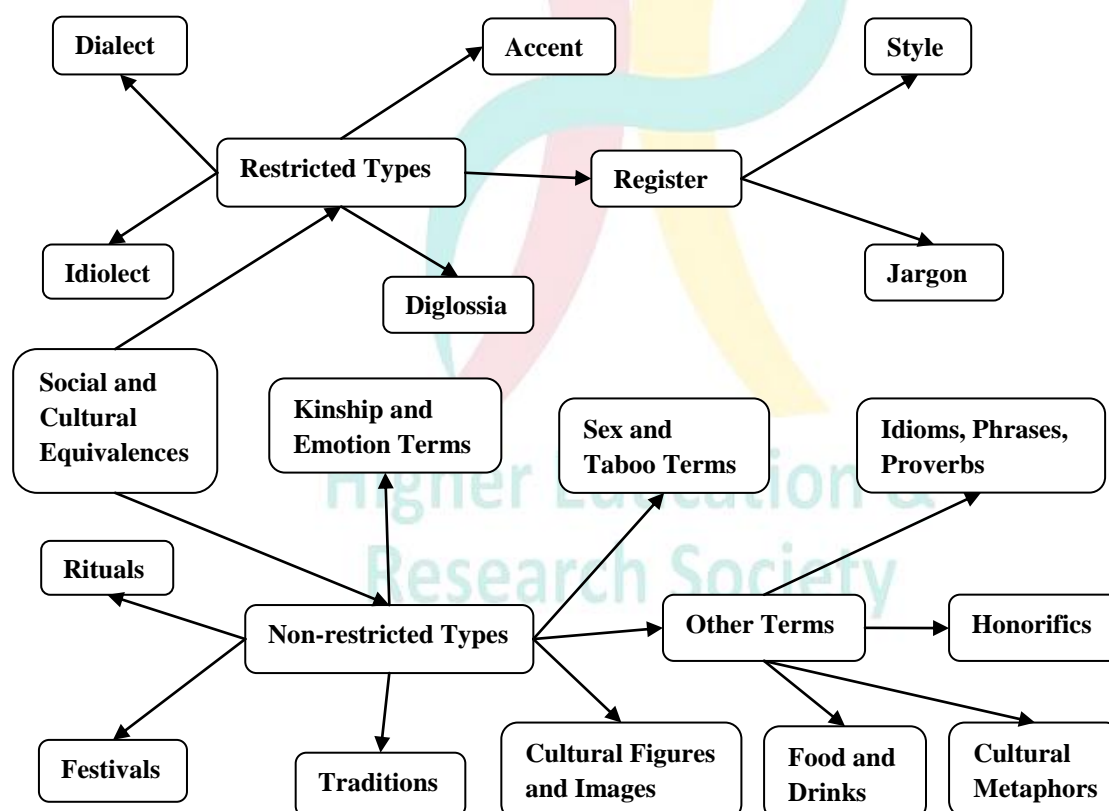


Diagram: Social and Cultural Equivalence.

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