Creative Translations: In-/visibility of the Translator

Sanghita Sanyal

Abstract

Today, translation in India, is a huge creative industry, that puts to practice all kinds of lexical conversions across languages and media. However, the transformation or re-production of a text from a source language to any target language can be of various kinds, literal or idiomatic, direct or essential and there can be no absolute principle to call one good or bad. However, in this whole process, what is most debated is the presence/absence, in-/visibility questions of the translator as an artist/author. Thus, this paper attempts to undertake brief research into the various kinds of translations and related theories that often contradict each other so as to trivialize or prioritize the presence of a translator; with the support of some observations around common examples of translations and the anomalies and perfections they achieve. The paper thereby attempts to open up some common questions around translation as a creative activity and how the translator is lost and found in it.

Keywords: *translation, strategies, untranslatability, lexical, idiomatic.*

In the simplest of terms, translations mean converting words, texts from one language to another. That would mean communicating a word and its related cultural context from a source language to a target language. How close or how loose is the translation determines whether the translation is literal or far-fetchedand can somewhat sketchily convey the meaning and context.A translation is mainly considered a linguistic activity, which is interesting (because it mainly involves a lot of brainstorming to find the closest possible alternative) and it is at the same time, a challenging activity. However, translation can also be creative beyond being merely a clinical activity, where the target product is a complex outcome of the original, with greater qualities, and can often be more (or less) substantial in meaning.

Every language has its rhythm, cadence, grammar and system ofmeaning building. There can be various ways of saying one thing in different ways in a language. Words can differ, tone can differ.

Communication involves many aspects – verbal and extra-verbal. Such aspects of a language also may not be very straightforward and easy to translate.Often, such areas involve words that can be reasonably untranslatable from one language to the other, keeping the meaning intact. Then the tendency of more descriptive, indirect alternatives come into usage. In the process, often too many words have to be used for the explanation which somewhat mars the poetic, metaphorical quality of the original.In this essay,I would concentrate on the problem of translating words and their translatable or untranslatable meanings, with a few examples, and therebyexamine the problems and comparative success and failure in the transmission of idiomatic content from one language to another in literature, advertisement and popular themes. In the process I will use the theories of Lawrence Venuti and Susan Bassnett to my aid.Venuti, in a shorter essay titled 'The Translator's Invisibility' had posited an elaborate observation:

> …a translation is judged acceptable (by editors, reviewers and readers) when it reads fluently, when the absence of any awkward phrasings, unidiomatic constructions or confused meanings gives the appearance that the translation reflects the foreign author's personality or intention or essential meaning of the original text.[1]

Venuti further holds on to the opinion that, 'the more 'successful' the translation, the more invisible the translator, and the more visible the author or meaning of the original text.'[2]   Even Earnest-August Gutt's Relevance Theory of Translation[3] also follows the same idea. In that case, we could say, Rabindranath Tagore's own translations of his poems are quite unsuccessful, as the translator-self of the poet renders the author-self almost invisible.

We can also mention some iconic Indian titles that can be very difficult to translate if the metaphorical significance has to be kept intact: *Tamas*, *Madhushala* or even, *Rashmi Rathi* for example, have mostly been kept intact, as translators found that the original title is much more meaningful than a translated one. For that matter, even Tagore's *Songs Offerings* as a title is less popular than what it was translated from, *Gitanjali*, although many are unaware that the complete Bengali version was not translated into *Songs Offerings,* only some selected lyrics. The question arises whether in such a situation the untranslated titles render the translators visible or invisible.

In order to delve deeper into these questions, let us distinguish between two commonly used principles behind any translation as a project, at the very outset. One is readability of the text, that is, easy accessibility of the meaning in the target language, another is proximity, that is nearness to the meaning of the source text, literal as well as idiomatic. 'Readability' would mean how easy it sounds to the foreign ears, and 'proximity' would mean how close the translated text is to the original. In order to be readable and closer to the original, some translations often end up being too simplistic and may not live up to the grandeur, weight and fullness of the meaning of the original. Again, some could be far-fetched and not a literal translation and may end up being an individualistic, artistic re-creation of the original in meaning. The second kind, over time, has been considered to be a distinct creative activity that exists precariously between a direct translation and an adaptation.

It is, however, up to the translator to decide what his methodology would be. Pertinently, it must be mentioned here that translation strategies can be of two kinds, and sometimes one may include both in his/her methodology, as and when it is appropriate to do a proper, readable, meaningful translation: A) Minimum Change Strategy where the original syntax and meaning are retained as closely as possible. B) Explicit Explanation Strategy where the original sense is retained, but the style, syntactic structure etc., are changed, as the translator takes liberty with his/her creativity. A translator should know best what kind of translation is possible for a text. If a text in a particular source language is too deep and philosophical, translating may often become difficult. Then the translator's work of conveying the correct meaning and significance of the text to the target audience becomes a complex activity. That is why, in most cases, as we observe, no translator prefers to stick to either of the strategy alone. They use both as and when it helps them.

Another example may be cited from Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali*. As far as the literal meaning, is concerned *Chokher Bali* is a flake of sand in the eye, something that gets into the eye and brings tears. The idiomatic meaning of the phrase is someone who one cannot stand. However, if that sense needs to be expressed in an English title, it would be difficult. A standard and accepted English Translation of the title is 'A Grain of Sand'. One can see that, this mentions nothing about the eye and so may be considered incomplete and not close to the novel's theme. Compared to this, now a Hindi translation of the novel has its title as '*Ankh ki Kirkire*'.

That is somewhat ironic, it catches the literal meaningdirectly, but the realidiomatic significance somehow gets ironically lost in the process, as the sound as well as the directness of translation fails to capture the Bengali cultural context of the idiom.

Often, in various situations we find, two kinds of anomalies happening. A translator keeps some particular audience in mind and mouldsthe translation specifically for them. For instance, when Satyajit Ray translated his father's nonsense rhymes, we often find such anomalies. In a poem, *Bombagorer Raja*,Sukumar Ray writes '*Aamshottobhaja*', which though not fried in Bengali, means '*aampapad*' in Hindi and does not have any direct English parallel for the signifier. It is basically a kind of candied mango.Then, as Satyajit Ray translates it into 'The King of Bombardia,'[4]he uses'chocolates' there in its place. It is understandably difficult to find a one-word alternative for '*aamshotto*', but under no circumstances, can its linguistic parallel be chocolate. Then should it be considered a cultural parallel? Nevertheless, that too is far-fetched. Even 'bread' ('*pauruti*' in Bengali) becomes 'custard-pies' in the same translation of Ray.

Interestingly, all of Ray's translations are perceptibleshifts from the originals; however, though undoubtedly lyrical and creative, Ray takes liberty in changing several elements in the poems. One example must be given in this context– in the poem '*Gondho Bichaar*' (which Ray translates as 'Odour in the Court'), there is a character called Ram Narayan Patra, which the translated text completely elides and turns him into the 'Court Physician'; even Chandraketu becomes Chunder in the translation, to rhyme it with 'thunder.'[5] Nonetheless, these poems would remain rich examples of the translator's liberty to turn the original into a version that we might call a 'counteroriginal' than just a mere translation.

Again, translators maysometimes be limited by keeping words intact. This observation can be underpinned by a few instances from commercial translation works as in advertisements and promotion slogans. Sometimes the shifts are even more interesting. For example, quite a few years back, in Hindi promotionals of toothpastes, soaps and health drinks two words were often used–'*Kitanu*'(which means 'germs') and '*Tandrust*' (which means 'strong' or 'healthy'). Neither of these words is there in Bengali vocabulary. However, in the Bengali dubbed versions of the same promotions, the translators would not change these words into the Bengali parallels of germs or strong. They keep '*kitanu*' and '*tandrust*' right there. When the

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Bengali-speaking populationhears it, thewords would stick out as weird and jarring because we usually do not use them in Bengali. As a result, the smoothness of translation is lost, disturbed and maybe,to look at it more optimistically, sometimes we find new Hindi words get incorporated (very rarely though) into Bengali vocabulary because of these sporadic foreign interpolations. Two such examples would be words like '*matlab*' and '*kenoki*'. Hindi speaking people use '*matlab*' as 'I mean' or 'which means' and '*kiyonki*' would simply mean 'because' in Hindi. However, modern Bengali speaking people, especially the youth, have comfortably incorporated the usage in Bengali vocabulary, for reasons unknown.

Another interesting development in more recent times is that the commercial promotions, be it Bengali or Hindi, use general English words like 'germ' or 'strong'. They do not use the vernacular signifiers at all.Such an observation mightalso open up a separate discourse about how English is becoming a more viable, practical link language, and our dependence on it is increasing each day. In hindsight, we also see that the quality of colloquial speech, vernacular vocabulary and diction often gets adulterated; and the pace of this adulteration is so fast that we would not be surprised if, in future, within an already existing vernacular languageEnglish words almost completely replace a vernacular alternative. For example, in Bengali 'kettle', 'cup-plate' (for cup and saucer) are two very common words of everyday usage, where the Bengali originals are supplanted to the extent that they have faded into oblivion.

Translation as a literary activity is a vast industry globally. This may be called a creative industry. An industry that thrives on translated reproductions/representations of the original creation. It may be TV/print promotions, like the instancegiven earlier. It may be film dubbings, film adaptations, songs' adaptations from one language to another. It may also be documentaries. Thanks to global culture today, every field of communication must have a parallel translation industry working for it. Especially in India, with so many national, regional vernacular languages existing, it is natural that translation would be a significant corpus that would generate creative, intellectual productions thatare economically viable. With regional language versions of Animal Planet, National Geographic and Discovery Channel that run popularly, translation as a creative activity gainssolid grounds where the challenge is as much as the fun.In India, Hindi and English act as the link languages to bridge that linguistic gap. Today interpreters' and translators' jobs have a high demand

in the public and private sectors.

Furthermore, every translator is caught between the 'readability' and 'proximity' questions of translation activities. In the fast-moving industry of quantity-oriented production, the question remains, how creative and sonorous the translations may be. There are, perhaps, verbatim, literal, 'minimum change' translations more than creative ones and maintaining readability or fluency becomes the main objective, keeping a high-speed transmission in purview.
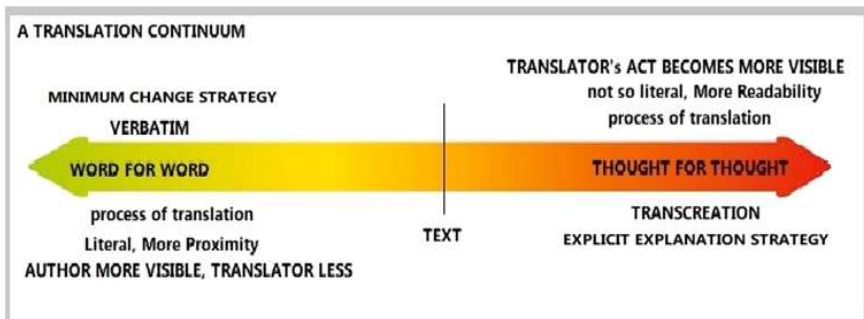
The idea of readability is somewhat similar to Venuti's concept of 'Fluency' that he elaborated in his seminal text *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995). There, he had proposed a strong sentiment about a 'translator's situation and activity' and maintained that fluency is a critical factor in the quality of any translation. The translator's reworking must 'insure easy readability'[6] of the original, in such a manner that renders the translator invisible and brightens up the author's (original) work. This opinion highlights the translator's altruistic responsibility to share the wholesomeness of the author and the original work with a wider readership (only in a different language). This perspective tends to relegate a translator to the level of something like a sieve, which has been problematized time and again by various counter-arguments in the discourse of translation. Theorists like Susan Bassnett would hold on to the view that a translator may not be so invisible after all, and a translated reworking will have a real contribution to make with 'new concepts, new genres, new devices' which wields a 'shaping power of one culture upon another.'[7] This opinion of Bassnett, perhaps gives more importance to the identity of the translator and the target language, and their potential to create a new 'transcreation'. In this ever-going discourse on the role and importance of the translator in widening the readership of any vernacular text, a very critical argument raised in the process is about the proximity of the translated text to the original. The obvious question that follows is how close the translated text to the original, is proximity the only yardstick to label a translation as good or bad. That would be a rather slippery ground to tread. Then how would we judge Satyajit Ray's translations of his father's nonsense poems[8] or Tagore's translations of his own poems, essays and his translations of Shelley or Kabir? Even his translations of Byron or from Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*[9] can be read as great examples of creative translations. It would be an interesting point

to note here that Tagore translated Kabir's poems not from his Urdu originals but from the Bengali translations done by Kshitimohan Sen.[10] This information can open up another aspect of translation and its linguistic dependence on texts used as source or link.

Here, contextually, we must remember Earnest-August Gutt's Relevance Theory of Translation. It recognizes two approaches to the art: the source text orientation and the target text orientation. The first one may want to adhere more to the original text and its culturally embedded language, making the translator much more visible; while in the second approach, the translator renders herself invisible by stepping beyond the linguistic model of the original shifting into a more trans-creative process. Guttfollows Venuti and argues that if a translator keeps closer to the original, he is more visible with respect to the proximity question, but if the translator doesidiomatic translation, he is more invisible, while the author's intention gets more meaningfully conveyed in the final outcome. This perhaps makes the end-product less imitative and a more adaptive version of the original, where the essence is preserved as closely as possible. Here the question is whether a more creative kind of translation makes a translator visible or invisible. As per our argument in this essay, the result is or should be just the opposite – the closer and verbatim the translation is, the less visible is the translator and the author's essence is retained as much as possible. On the contrary, the more creative the translation is, the translator's identity, style, thoughts, and metacognitive response to the original textget reflected more in it, making her more visible in this target language 'counteroriginal'.

This idea may be represented with a diagram as below:

A TRANSLATION CONTINUUM

MINIMUM CHANGE STRATEGY
VERBATIM

WORD FOR WORD

process of translation
Literal, More Proximity
AUTHOR MORE VISIBLE, TRANSLATOR LESS

TEXT

TRANSLATOR's ACT BECOMES MORE VISIBLE
not so literal, More Readability
process of translation

THOUGHT FOR THOUGHT

TRANSCREATION
EXPLICIT EXPLANATION STRATEGY

Such debates can go on; whenever one text gets translated from one language to another, the translation continuum may vary from being very close to the original to being very far.A creative translation is an art as it enables the translator to visualize more than she sees and put her own colours to the picture; this is not so easy to achieve and it involves risks of losing the purpose or intent, or even flavour. Whether a translated text is a mere paraphrase of the original (in a different linguistic code) or a trans-created version essentially identical in meaningwith the original and intact in its intent – both can be equally captivating, and it depends on the capacity, style and purpose or objective of the translator as to how the translation will be shaped. Although the primary aim of any translator is to produce a 'receptor language text' which is 'idiomatic, that is, one which has the same meaning as the source language but is expressed in the natural form of the receptor language. The meaning, not the form is retained.'[11]

Further, as an example, let me cite Tagore's translation of Shelley's 'Love's Philosophy'[12] into '*Premtotwo*,'[13] where two stanzas of eight lines each are combined in the Bengali version into a complete single poem of sixteen lines. Keeping to the iambic rhythm of the original with an uncanny perfection, it displays Tagore's genius that can create such a masterpiece. Here we find only one incorporation of the word '*Lolona*' (in Bengali, meaning 'Lady') in place of Shelley's 'thou' that I am sure, would not be considered a deviation, as the target text lacks in neither fluency, readability nor proximity, yet successfully becomes an instance of Tagore's poetic individuality. For easy reference of the readers, the two texts are quoted below:

> The fountains mingle with the river
>   And the rivers with the ocean,
> The winds of heaven mix for ever
>   With a sweet emotion;
> Nothing in the world is single;
>   All things by a law divine
> In one spirit meet and mingle.
>   Why not I with thine?—
>
> See the mountains kiss high heaven
>   And the waves clasp one another;
> No sister-flower would be forgiven

> If it disdained its brother;
> And the sunlight clasps the earth
>   And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
> What is all this sweet work worth
>   If thou kiss not me?

নিঝর মিশেছে তটিনীর সাথে
        তটিনী মিশেছে সাগর–ঐ পরে,
পবনের সাথে মিশিছে পবন
        চির–সুমধুর প্রণয়–ভরে!
জগতে কেহই নাইকো একেলা,
        সকলি বিধির নিয়ম–গুণে,
একের সহিত মিশিছে অপরে
        আমিবা কেননা তোমার সনে?
দেখো, গিরি ওই চুমিছে আকাশে,
        ঢেউ–ঐ পরে ঢেউ পড়িছে ঢলি,
সে কুল বালারে কেবা না দোষিবে,
        ভাইটিরে যদি যায় সে ভুলি!
রবি–কর দেখো চুমিছে ধরণী,
        শশি–কর চুমে সাগরজল,
তুমি যদি মোরে না চুম ঐ, ললনা,
        এ–সব চুম্বনে কী তবে ফল?

As we read such examples of creative translations, it does not quite help us with a conclusive yardstick about how far creative translations can go while keeping the original's meaning, intent and structure more or less the same. Nonetheless, it does leave enough scope for the translator to let her identity flow into the body of the original that she (re)creates.

Endnotes :

[1] Lawrence Venuti, 'The Translator's Invisibility,' *Criticism* 28.2(1986): 179-212.

[2] Lawrence Venuti, 'The Translator's Invisibility.'

[3] The Relevance Theory Perspective of Ernst-August Gutt is a widely discussed

theory of translation which was an elaborate thesis, proposed in the book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (1991). His basic premise was laid on the opinion that translation is a practice which is a kind of secondary communication where the communicative success can be achieved through the levels of relevance. Although often debated over, his observations have a significant impact on modern theory and practice of translations.

[4] Satyajit Ray, *Nonsense Rhymes: Sukumar Ray* (Kolkata: Writers' Workshop, 2019), p.10.

[5] Satyajit Ray, *Nonsense Rhymes,* p.17.

[6] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995) p.1.

[7] Susan Bassnett, Preface, *The Translator's Invisibility*,p. vii.

[8] Sukumar Ray's nonsense poems included in his most famous volume *Abol Tabol* have been translated widely. One such volume titled *Nonsense Rhymes* is a collection of ten translations done by his son Satyajit Ray. It was published by Writers' Workshop, Kolkata, first in 1970, with multiple reprints thereafter.

[9] Rabindranath Tagore's corpus of poetry also includes translations of many poets of English literature. About 42 such poems by various poets like William Shakespeare, George Gordon Byron, P.B. Shelley, Robert Burns, Heinrich Heine are found. Among them a considerable number of translations are from *Irish Melodies* which is a collection of lyrics composed by the eighteenth-century Irish poet-musician Thomas Moore between 1807 and 1834. Not only the poems of *Irish Melodies*, some of the melodies also had a deep impact on Tagore, some of which he adapted in his play *Vâlmîki-Pratibhâ* (1881).

[10] Kshitimohan Sen (1880-1960) was a scholar, educationist, and author. He studied Sanskrit and taught at Viswa Bharati from 1908. Among many books, Sen's *Kabir* requires special mention as it was the source text that Tagore followed to translate *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (1915).

[11] Mashadi Said, *Translation Theory,* <https://slideplayer.com/slide/8093380/#.YUrsA0wYk1o.gmail>Accessed 27.01.2021.

[12] P.B. Shelley, 'Love's Philosophy,'*John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley Complete Poetical Works With the Explanatory Notes of Shelley's Poems by Mrs. Shelley*(New York: The Modern Library, 1960), p. 622.

[13] Rabindranath Tagore, '*Premtotwo*', '*AnubadKobita*', *Rabindra Rachanavali Vol.17* (Kolkata: Viswa Bharati, 2010) p. 116.