

# Translating Poeticity: A Case Study of the Tirukkural Translations into French

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## Abstract

*If translating prose is a challenging task, translating poetic text is a greater challenge and even considered impossible by many scholar-translators who made honest attempts to do the same. To render as equally as possible the form and the content of the original work into the target language remains the eternal concern of literary translators. Although it is desirable to keep both, the aesthetic value and the message intact in translation, most of the times, translators succeed in rendering one of them and scarify the other. Tirukkural, the monumental poetic work of Tamil literature, has been translated into numerous languages across the world including French. After the first translation into French in 1767, Kural has been translated several times again into the same language by several scholars. Among the available translations in French, the one done by Lamairesse in 1868 and another one done by Gnanou Diagou in 1942 are particularly remarkable as the former is a native French speaker and the latter is a Francophone of Tamil origin. This paper presents the differences and similarities between the two aforementioned translations and thereby attempts to investigate the possibility of translating the masterpiece of the philosopher Tiruvalluvar into a foreign language.*

**Keywords:** Translation, poetry, French, Tamil, Tirukkural.

## Introduction

Among all types of texts that are translated, only literary texts engage the translator in a creative process and offer him/her, if not a lucrative experience, a joyful one of working with great

literature. The creativity involved in translating a literary work is made up of numerous factors such as *who translates?*, *for whom s/he translates?*, *who is translated?*, *from which language s/he translates?*, *into which language s/he translates?*, *etc.* In other words, these aforementioned factors decide how the translation of a literary work is done. Generally, literary translators make a series of choices that define the final output of the translating act. S/he first chooses the literature of a particular language, then a particular author of this literature and then a particular work of this author and so on. This combination of more than a few choices has led to the creation of several branches in the study of literary translation. Each one of these branches indicates the decisions made, freely or under constraints, by the translator.

This truth is further confirmed by the fact that unlike in other fields of translation i.e. commercial, scientific, judiciary, technical, literary translation has given birth to several terms that reflect not only the level of creativity but also of liberty involved in the act of translating. Literal translation, adaptation, transcreation, rewriting, recreation are not merely terms that can be used in the place of translation as each of these terms refers to a different subfield of literary translation.

Also, a literary translator faces challenges that are not even imaginable to a non-literary translator as the latter concerns himself more with language and sometimes exclusively with language. If the literature of a language is divided into genres and these genres are in turn classified into literary currents to which they belong and these literary currents are further dissected into authors and their styles, each language and each genre and each period and each author and each style presents challenges in its own way to a translator who attempts to render them into another language.

Commonly, any literature is divided into two major categories: poetry and prose, and in most literatures, poetry is the ancient form of expression that preceded prose. Although prose poetry emerged as a new genre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the distinction between poetry in verse and prose as a simplified form of expression continues to exist in literature. It is true that prose can be beautiful as well and entertain the reader with a message in it but the bond between form and message is not necessarily inseparable, whereas in a poem, its form is intricately linked with the message and the images evoked by the words. For instance, Racine, a 17<sup>th</sup> century French dramatist, uses the alliteration with the sound of “s” to evoke the hissing sound of a snake in his play *Andromaque*. In twelve syllables, the sound of “s” is repeated five times including the word serpent which carries the sound in it.

“Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes?”(Racine 1886: 126)

Possessing all the above mentioned qualities, poetry never ceases to raise doubts and queries on the possibility of being translated. Some translators even look at it from a distance as a sacred fortress, whereas others dare to conquer its impenetrable edifice.

### **French Translations of the Tirukkural**

*Edouard Simon Ariel*, an official of French colony, who translated the *Tirukkural* into French in 1844, called it “a nameless work by a nameless author” (Pope 1886: i). He also calls it a mystery that attracted him, and therefore, wanted to introduce it to the French public. Many great men who translated *Kural* declare the quality of its content which motivated them to translate it but remain silent on the poetic form which expresses the content. The reason, why the translators have not spoken on poetic form of the work is

unknown to us. We can only assume that the translators gave more importance to the content than to the form, or the poetic elements in the *Tirukkural* were not comprehensible to them that they didn't take them into consideration while translating or, according to the translators only the message was translatable and not the poetic form of *Tirukkural*.

Then, should translators give up translating *Kural*? Or should they attempt to translate it despite the loss of its poetic value in translation? I would believe in the second opinion in his article entitled "Poetry Translation", Professor Hashim G. Lazim expresses his view that translators shouldn't give up translating poetry despite the risk of losing its poetic value. Also, he argues that if poetry is neglected for being untranslatable, we would be unaware of a great many poetic works from other literatures.

In this paper, I present the differences observed between two translations of the *Tirukkural* into French. Since the two translators belong to two different centuries, it's also an attempt to see if the translation has evolved with time and to examine the differences between a translation done by a target language translator i.e. *Lamaire* and the one done by a source language translator i.e. *Gnanou Diagou* who knows French. The comparison will be done with the examples of seven couplets selected at random to see how close they are to the original and how different they are from each other.

In order to make it understandable to a non-francophone reader, I provide a literal retranslation into English of the translated couplets. And by literal translation, I mean a translation which is, as possibly as it could be, close to the French version.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter "மடிபின்மை" (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 129) which means

*unsluggishness* and the following couplet from the *Tirukkural* explains how important it is to avoid sluggishness for the well being of the family.

குடியென்னுங் குன்றா விளக்கம் மடியென்னும்

மாகூர மாய்ந்து கெடும்- 601(Tiruvalluvar 2010: 129)

(kudiyennung kundra vilakkam madiyennum  
maasoora maainthu kedum)

The illustrious light called family will be put out  
if it is tainted by the filth called laziness.

L'éclat illustre dont a brillé constamment une  
famille s'efface

lorsqu'elle tombe dans une obscure inaction.

(Lamaïresse 1867: 102)

*The illustrious light with which shines a family  
effaces itself when it falls in an obscure inaction*

La flamme inextinguible appelée famille s'éteint,  
envahie par les ténèbres appelées paresse. (Gnanou

Diagou 1995: 90)

*The inextinguishable flame called family goes off,  
Invaded by the darkness called idleness*

The first translation brings the meaning in a direct manner and it eliminates the metaphor in the original. Instead of “The illustrious light called family” as in the original, it is translated as “the illustrious light with which shines a family” and conveys the message in one single utterance without any punctuation as in the original. The qualities of light compared to the family and the qualities of obscurity compared to idleness are not transferred as a metaphor, they are rather expressed as qualities attributed to family and idleness.

The second translation to some extent restores the alliteration of the sound“கு“ in the first verse by using twice the sound “F” in flame and family. Even though the same sound “ku” is not transferred, it is replaced by the sound of “F”. It is also interesting to notice that a punctuation “,” is used in the translation avoiding a conjunction “when”. We can also notice that the metaphor is transferred as in the original.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter “வினைத்திட்டம்” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 141), which means *firmness or power in action*. It says that action is more important than talking about the ways of executing an action.

சொல்லுதல் யார்க்கும் எளிய அரியவாம்  
சொல்லிய வண்ணம் செயல்- 664 (Tiruvalluvar  
2010: 141)

(solluthal yaarkkumeli yaari yavaam  
solliya vannam seyal.)

It is easy for anyone to say but it is hard  
to dowhat is said in the same manner.

Rien de facile comme de tracer des règles et de  
donner des ordres à tout le monde;

rien de difficile comme d’arriver à l’exécution.

(Lamaresse 1867: 111)

*Nothing as easy as making rules and giving orders  
to others;*

*nothing as difficult as being able to do.*

Il est facile à tous de proclamer un projet,

mais difficile de le réaliser de la façon annoncée.

(Gnanou Diagou 1995: 99)

*It’s easy for anyone to utter plans,*

*but difficult to do it in the said manner.*

The first translation of the above mentioned couplet changes the verb “சொல்லுதல்”, which means ‘to say’ in Tamil, into “making rules and giving orders” whereas the second translation changes the same verb into “uttering plans”. Both the translations have used different verbs in the place of “to say” and added an object to the verb which is not there in the original. It is also important to notice that amongst the two translations, the one done by *Lamairesse* keeps the repetition of the same word “**Rien** de facile, **rien** de difficile” which to some extent imitates the repetition of the word “சொல்லுதல்” in the original. Both the translations have introduced a verb with an object while the beauty in the original lies in leaving the verb ‘say’ without any object so that the reader can himself or herself add a suitable object. These translations, hence, make us think that the translators have added their subjective choices to the translation, thereby acted more as a reader-translator who gives his subjective interpretation of the text than a mere messenger who simply conveys the message of the author.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter “நலம்புனைந்துரைத்தல்” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 233), which means in Tamil praise of her (a woman’s) beauty. It presents a comparison between the softness of a flower called “*Anitcham*” and the delicateness of the beloved woman.

நன்னீரை வாழி அனிச்சமே நின்னிணும்  
மென்னீரள் யாம்வீழ் பவள்.-1111(Tiruvalluvar  
2010: 233)  
(Nanneerai vaazhi anitchamai ninninum  
Menneeral yaamveezh baval)  
O flower Anitcha who lives in good waters! The  
woman I love is more delicate than you.

O fleur anicha !, je te salue ! Tu es la plus délicate  
des fleurs, mais l'objet de mon amour est plus  
délicat que toi. (Lamaresse 1867: 179)

*O flower Anitcha! I greet you! You are the most  
delicate amongst the flowers, but the object of my  
love is more delicate than you*

Vivo, fleur Anistcha ! ta bonne nature l'emporte sur  
celle de toutes les fleurs; cependant celle que  
j'aime est d'une nature, encore plus délicate que la  
tienne

(Gnanou Diagou 1995: 170)

*Long live flower Anistcha! You are the most soft  
natured amongst all the flowers; however the one I  
love is of a nature more delicate than you*

The couplet from the section “காமத்துப்பால்” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 225) is a comparison between a flower and the beloved lady of the poet. On the one hand, the rhyme in the beginning of the verse is not transferred in the translation; on the other hand, the translation speaks more explicitly of the comparison that was kept unsaid in the original. In other words, the original doesn't speak about the softness of the flower. It simply says “O Anitcha who lives in good waters”. The comparison becomes more evident only in the second verse that starts with the word “மென்சீரள்” which means “delicate” referring to the woman. The beauty of a poetic text is to say things more implicitly, a significant characteristic which distinguishes a poem from prose. Moreover, the above mentioned couplet seems to be appearing in the subdivision “களவியல்” which speaks about premarital-love, hence, the implicit nature of the comparison seems to be nothing than an echo of the secrecy that characterizes the premarital love relation between a man and a woman. One more important element in the original is that the “flower Anitcham” is not



mentioned as a flower in the original; it's rather treated as an equivalent to a human being (personification) with whom the lover holds a conversation. The two translations are explicit interpretations of the poetic text of which the beauty resides in the implicit.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter “குறிப்பறிதல்” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 229), which means *recognition of the signs (signs of love)*.

இருநோக்கு      இவளுண்கண்      உள்ளது  
ஒருநோக்கு

நோய்நோக்கொன்      றந்நோய்      மருந்து.-  
1091(Tiruvalluvar 2010:229)

(irunokku ivalunkan ullathu orunokku  
noinokkond rannoi marunthu.)

There are two looks in her eyes; one makes you  
sick

and the other makes you recover.

Il y a chez elle deux regards, l'un qui donne  
destourments, l'autre qui les guérit.  
(Lamaire 1867: 176)

*In her there are two looks, one which gives  
torments, the other which cures them.*

Ses yeux peints ont deux regards, dont l'un me  
cause la douleur, mais dont l'autre  
constitue un remède à cette douleur. (Gnanou  
Diagou 1995: 167)

*Her lined eyes have two looks, of which one causes  
the pain, but the other one is a remedy to this pain.*

The couplet is highly alliterated with the sound “N” and the word “நோய்” is repeated thrice. It's also assonantal with the sound “e”. The message is highly implicit, hence, many

meanings can be attributed. The first translation of Lamairesse seems to completely ignore the alliteration and the assonance of the original. If we observe the second translation, the word “douleur” which means pain is repeated twice; hence, we can say that the effect of alliteration is to some extent restituted by the translator although it’s not as successful as the original.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter “நீத்தார்பெருமை” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 11), which means *the greatness of Ascetics*.

துறந்தார் பெருமை துணைக்கூறின் வையத்து

இறந்தாரை எண்ணிக்கொண் டற்று. – 22

(Tiruvalluvar 2010: 11)

(thuranthaar perumai thunaikoorin vaiyatthu  
iranthaarai ennikkon datru)

An attempt to tell all the greatness of those who renounced is like trying to count the number of those who died in this world. Enumérer tous les mérites des religieux est aussi difficile que de nombrer les hommes qui sont morts depuis le commencement du monde jusqu'à ce jour.

(Lamairesse 1867: 12)

*Counting the merits of the religious is as difficult as counting the men who died since the beginning of this world till date.*

Tenter d'évaluer la grandeur de ceux qui ont renoncé au monde, c'est

tenter de dénombrer les morts ici-bas. (Gnanou Diagou 1995: 5)

*Attempting to evaluate the greatness of those who gave up the world is attempting to count the dead ones down here.*

Before getting into the study of the above mentioned couplet and its translations into French, we should pay attention to the translation of the chapter title under which it appears. The chapter title in Tamil is “நீத்தார்பெருமை” ‘Neethaar Perumai’ which means the greatness of those who renounced and which is translated by Lamairesse and Gnanou Diagou as follows:

Eloge de la sublimité des religieux. (Lamairesse 1867: 12)

Praise of the sublimity of religious

Grandeur de ceux qui ont renoncé au monde  
(Gnanou Diagou 1995: 5)

The greatness of those who renounced the world

The translation of Lamairesse changes the connotation of the title by adding the word “religieux” which means religious or, clergymen or, faithful whereas the original has no reference to religion. Also, we see that the translation of Gnanou Diagou has no religious connotation at all and therefore reflects the original.

We can observe the same term used again by Lamairesse, in his translation of the couplet. Religion, therefore, takes a centre place in the interpretation of the *Kural* by Lamairesse, which will be passed on to the reader as well. As far as the translation of Gnanou Diagou is concerned, the word chosen is neutral and so is close to the meaning of the text.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter “கேள்வி” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 91) which means *hearing*.

செல்வத்துட்      செல்வஞ்      செவிச்செல்வம்  
அச்செல்வஞ்

செல்வத்துளெல்லாந் தலை.- 411 (Tiruvalluvar  
2010: 91)

(selvatthut chelvanj chevichelvam atchelvanj  
chelvatthu lellaandh thalai)

Hearing is the most precious of all riches and it is  
also the head of all riches.

Les richesses qui s'acquièrent par l'ouïe, c'est-à-  
dire par la conversation de savants, doivent être  
appelées les richesses par excellence, puisqu'elles  
sont supérieures à toutes les autres.  
(Lamaïresse 1867: 73)

*The riches that are acquired by hearing, which is  
by conversing with scholars, should be called the  
ultimate riches, since they are superior to all  
others.*

La richesse des richesses est celle de l'oreille.

Elle est la première de toutes les richesses.  
(Gnanou Diagou 1995: 63)

*The riches of all riches are those of the ear.  
they are the first of all riches.*

The couplet is highly anaphoric; the word “செல்வம்” which means “riches” in Tamil, is repeated five times, thereby emphasizing the fact that hearing is the unparalleled wealth one can have. The translation of Lamaïresse is a complete elaboration of the original by adding to it some personal interpretation that hearing is related to conversation between scholars alone. But the translation of Gnanou Diagou reestablishes to some extent the “anaphora” by repeating the word riches thrice. Besides, as we already discussed in the case of another couplet, the chapter title of this couplet is also translated in an interesting way, differently by both the translators.

கேள்வி

S'instruire par le commerce des savants (Lamairesse  
1867: 73)

*Learning by the commerce of scholars*

De l'audition (Gnanou Diagou 1995: 63)

*Audition*

The French culture, in which conversation and rhetoric are much appreciated, has no doubt influenced the translation of the title and the couplet by Lamairesse. Although the original speaks about hearing rather than what should be heard, hence, giving all possible choices of hearing which also include listening in a conversation, the translation limits the meaning to “listening in a conversation” alone. Therefore, the translation of Lamairesse restricts the meaning because of the cultural boundaries within which the translator is confined. But the translator Gnanou Diagou has taken the same term as the original “audition or hearing” which, as in the original, contains the possibility of multiple interpretations about ‘hearing’.

The following couplet has been taken from the chapter “ஊக்கமுடைமை” (Tiruvalluvar 2010: 127) which means *energy* or *motivation*. In this couplet, the poet makes a comparison between the elevation of aquatic flower which is proportional to the water level, and the progress in a man’s life which would also be in proportion to his benevolence.

வெள்ளத் தனைய மலர்நீட்டம் மாந்தர்தம்

உள்ளத் தனைய துயர்வு.- 595(Tiruvalluvar

2010: 127)

(vellath thanaya malarneettam maanthartham

ullath thanaya dhuyarvu.)

The rise of an aquatic flower depends on the level of the water similarly men's progress depends on their benevolence.

Les fleurs qui naissent dans les eaux ne s'élèvent que jusqu'au niveau auquel les eaux montent elles-mêmes, de même les hommes ne s'élèvent qu'en raison de la hauteur de leur âme.  
(Lamaïresse 1867: 101)

*The flowers born in water grow till the level to which the water itself rises, in the same way men grow as high as their soul.*

La longueur des tiges des fleurs aquatiques est la mesure de la profondeur de l'eau : ainsi la grandeur est la mesure de la force de volonté de l'homme  
(Gnanou Diagou 1995: 89).

*The length of the stem of aquatic flowers is the measure of the depth of the water: thus greatness is the measure of the strength of man's will.*

Although Lamaïresse's translation transfers the metaphor, it introduces the word 'soul' which in the original is 'will' or 'mind'. Hence he relates it to a term which is more perceived as a religious one in French. In Gnanou Diagou's translation, he maintains the word 'will' as it is more close to the original. One more proof that the translators approached the original text with different perspectives is proven through the translation of this couplet. Lamaïresse speaks about the height of the water that contributes to the length of the stem whereas Gnanou Diagou speaks about the depth of the water that contributes to the stem's growth. Again both the translators translate the title of the concerned chapter differently as given below.

ஊக்கமுடைமை

De la force d'âme. (Lamaïresse 1867: 100)

Force of the soul

De l'énergie (Gnanou Diagou 1995: 88).

*Energy.*

## **Conclusion**

In the light of the above given examples and comparisons, we observe that both the translators have approached the text from different perspectives. Gnanou Diagou's translation seems to be more close to the original than that of Lamairesse. As the translator Gnanou Diagou is from the source-culture i.e. Tamil, we may assume that he had a better understanding of the original than the translator of the target culture i.e. Lamairesse. However, we also have to admit that Gnanou Diagou's translation does not succeed in transferring all poetic elements that are in the original. This is probably because the poetic elements of the *Tirukkural* are not as translatable as its message. Besides, Lamairesse's translation is more like an interpretation of the *Kural* in a religious perspective. Also, Lamairesse adds in several cases elements of French culture to which he belongs. In addition to all this, we also tend to think that a poetic and philosophical work such as the *Tirukkural* is more rooted in its own language that its rendering in any other language cannot happen without going through some loss both in terms of its form and its content. As these attempts of rendering the *Tirukkural* into French have not been entirely successful, should we call them translations or should we invent a new term for these renderings, as has been the case so far in the field of literary translation?

## **Note**

All translations of the original couplets into English as well as all retranslations of the French versions into English are done by me.

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