

Translating and Reviewing:Some Ruminations

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Abstract

This paper will attempt a theorisation of my experience of translation and reviewing. I have about a dozen reviews of translations into Telugu from other languages and about a half dozen of them of translations from Telugu to English. I want to add my own experience as a translator to these ideas as a reviewer. Among my foci are faithfulness and creativity in translation, cultural roots of the original text and differences of a target language audience, reviewer's general rigidity in looking at the translation from either of these two.

I think translation is a kind of reviewing, and reviewing involves translation. One cannot review without translating and similarly one cannot translate without reviewing. Reviewing a translated text becomes reviewing an already reviewed text, maybe a derivative of a derivative. Thus translation and reviewing are intertwined in an ambivalent relationship where one has to review the text one is translating and vice versa.

To throw more light on this difficult relationship between translation and reviewing, I give examples from my own experience as a translator. The books I translated include texts from Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Japanese and African that came into English as well as some in original English. With hindsight I can say that I was reviewing the texts before I translated each sentence, paragraph and chapter. Maybe it is impossible to translate a text without reviewing and assessing what to be brought into the target language, what turn of phrase in the target language is nearer to that in the source, and at least in abridgement, what could be avoided.

The translator will also have the duty to edit the original text keeping in view the sensibilities and linguistic and cultural traditions of the target language. This editing as part of translation might appear blasphemous, but my own readings and comparisons of translated texts with originals demonstrate that each translator has his or her own way of 'editing.' I would like to argue that even the difference in syntactical structure itself leads to editing. A typical sentence in English cannot be translated with similar stress on subject or object or verb into a different language where the sentence structure completely modifies that stress. I would argue that this is natural editing unintended by the translator—natural in the sense that it is characteristic of the target language and unintended because of the sense of faithfulness on the part of the translator. However, in abridgement and free translation, editing becomes intentional, besides being natural. This editing might be a result of ideological position of the translator or just a lack of understanding of the source language nuances.

What appears as a beautiful expression or passage in the source language might lose its charm completely in the target language. Similarly a clumsy phrase in the original might blossom into a wonderful passage in the target language. A translator might think that the writer knowingly or unknowingly was giving expression to his or her own agendas and included several unnecessary passages in the text and all that has to be pruned in the translation. For example, the Telugu classic Viswanatha Satyanarayana's *Veyipadagalu* has a number of arguments that glorify 'varnaasramadharmā' running into pages. Any ordinary reader would think those arguments are unnecessary for the smooth flow of the narrative. A translator cannot but prune those arguments. To give another example, Sahavasi, an accomplished translator in Telugu, had done a rendering of William Hinton's *Fanshen*, pruning all the political arguments from the book, yet the Telugu translation was regarded as a great work. Again Sahavasi's highly successful translation *Edutaraalu*, of Alex Haley's *Roots*, brought only three generations into Telugu as against seven generations in English. In contrast, Ranganayakamma's Telugu translation of Charles Bettelheim's *China Since Mao* became double

the size of the original with translation additions and explanations, of course, in foot notes. I think all these additions, deletions, modifications, pruning and icing are part of reviewing without their being called so.

Here I would like to make an attempt to illustrate this from my own example. I translated a Chinese novel *Song of Youth* by Yang Mo in 1985. This huge novel of about 700 pages portrays the student movement in the wake of a patriotic united front against Japanese invasion of China during the 1930s. Being a historical and period novel, it had woven a lot of things together from student life to romance, sentiments, betrayal, patriotism, Kou Min Tang, Communist Party, armed struggle, the united front of nationalist forces against foreign aggression, etc. My Telugu translation of the novel came at the height of radical student movement in Andhra Pradesh, five decades later.

First of all, though *Udayageethika* was a translation of *Song of Youth*, they were separated in time and space. *Song of Youth* had a lot of patriotic fervour of students in the face of a foreign invasion against their motherland. But my target audience was part of a class struggle and they would not be able to relate to the situation of a foreign invasion. Thus there was a marked difference in the context of the novels theme and the novel's readership. The novel also drew a lot from Chinese history and my readers would be at a loss to understand all of that. The novel's length grew because of its portrayal of love affairs between students who were part of the movement and my readers primarily were in a mood of dismissing all that love and sentiment as middle class nonsense, whether I liked it or not. There was a marked change in the value system. Of course, above all this, the Telugu market would not allow me to publish a novel of that size. Indeed, if I had done a true translation, it would have become an unmanageable 800 page tome.

Thus I had to become a reviewer first and edited it to half the size. I had to carefully choose what was needed to have a smooth flow, at the same time taking precaution not to lose any significant

ideas and scenes. I had to read the original novel as an ordinary reader for the first time for the pleasure of it, as an editor-reviewer another time to prune or abridge it, and then translate it keeping the target reader in mind. Looking back, I would say this process was very complicated, painful and dynamic where reader, editor, translator and reviewer are one and the same as well as transform one into the other constantly.

Reviewing books is a genre that is not receiving its due attention these days. Except in a couple of specialized journals and newspapers, the review sections in several newspapers are passing off mere paraphrasing or unnecessary and unrelated opinionated pieces as reviews. At worst, some so-called reviews are what are given by the publishers of the books. To give the reviewers their due, the space limitations set by the editors are to be blamed. I remember one of my editors, a very knowledgeable person, directing the reviewer to limit the review to 100 words or 200 words depending on the size of the book.

A good review, in my opinion, should help future readers, extend new insights to those who already read the book and correct the writer's fallacies, if any, and highlight the positive contributions of the writer.

In order for a review to be good, I think, it has to have five ingredients: contextualizing the book, elucidating what the text tries to say, bringing the formal, stylistic and linguistic nuances of the text into sharp focus, pointing out the pitfalls in the text, and abstracting the novel and topics worth-researching in the book and putting them in perspective. Maybe this is more than what one could expect from a reviewer, but unless a review involves all these elements, it would be as good as a promotional blurb on the back cover.

Now let me turn to the business of reviewing translated texts. Again this is a very complicated and problematic arena. Continuing from rather high demands mentioned just now, contextualizing a

translated text requires a reasonably sound knowledge of the source and target languages and literary contexts. Then the reviewer has to have a clear knowledge of the content of the book and whether there is any incongruence between the original and the translation. The third aspect of the formal, stylistic and linguistic elements requires a reviewer to have a good understanding of these nuances as a writer would have. Pointing out pitfalls doesn't need any elaboration as that is being done amply. Listing out new and path breaking aspects of the text needs a fine sense of reading and an insightful and visionary outlook on the part of the reviewer.

If the reviewer knows the original language, the first thing that happens is a comparative study. And most of the time this comparison would lead to disastrous consequences. There is no denying that if one text is the translation of another text, one would tend to compare. But translation is not just copying from the original to the target language; the translator would have to be as creative as, if not less than, the original author. Thus a reviewer should approach a translated text also as he or she would approach an original text.

However, reviewers, even if they do not know the original language, would be put off with the translation of idioms, proverbs and other linguistic nuances, rooted in the particular culture of the original language. Here again we have a dilemma. Those who know the original language grumble that the translation was not faithfully done and those who don't know the language complain that it is clumsy and incomprehensible.

I'll try to touch upon my experience as a reviewer. Though I have done some Telugu reviews of translated texts into Telugu and I made some comments on the translation, I would like to leave them aside and take the examples of my reviews of texts translated into English.

Let me confess that I could not stick to what I stated just now. I was comparing the translated English text with the original Telugu

text and finding fault with the translation. This could be seen from two perspectives: one, there were some real errors in translating idioms, proverbs, phrases and cultural specificities and as a reviewer it was my duty to point them out. Two, rooted in the traditions of my mother tongue, or the original language, I could not overcome my affection for the language and the writers. I thought any deviation from the original, even if done to add value, was a sacrilege and I criticized the translators. In the process I forgot that the translated text was aiming at a reader who doesn't have any acquaintance with the original language, literature or the particular writer. Now in hindsight I can say my experience over the years made me realize how not to review a translated text. I think that a realization, rather unlearning, solves half of the problem and the rest is to learn how to review a translated text.