

Translation and English Studies: Relevance and (Un)necessity*

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Abstract:

English studies in India have progressed a long way since the introduction of English as a policy matter by the British. Though a part of the colonial legacy, it has definitely become the link language and the weapon for decolonization. The study of English texts in India needs to emerge from the translated mode. Translation is not the most appropriate method for learners who do not have a proficiency in both the languages involved. Moreover, translation negates the cultural ethos and misconstrues the etymological and idiomatic nuances of the translated language, creating a stilted and ludicrous effect. Thus, the study of English (texts and culture) through translation is an unnecessary and deconstructive exercise.

English studies in the academic sense should be taken up in a more authentic manner, encouraging learners to read the original texts and taste the actual flavour of the language instead of doing with any insipid translation or paraphrase of it.

Key words:

English studies, colonial, link,, decolonization, language, expression, idiomatic, original, imitation

English studies in India have come a long way now from the time English education was introduced and imposed upon the native population by Lord Macaulay's Minutes of 1835 and Woods Despatch of 1854 as part of the imperialistic policy of aggrandizement and as a tool to facilitate smooth governance. English is a part of the colonial legacy but paradoxically, it is this same language that has been used as the weapon for decolonisation too and is highly relevant in the Indian social conditions today. English is no longer considered a foreign language and the fact is that it has superseded the native Indian languages to become the first language of urban India. It is an undeniable truth that English has taken firm root in the Indian soil and all attempts by revivalist forces to uproot it in the name of nationalism will prove to be unsuccessful. The notion that it is English alone that can play the role of link language in the multi-lingual Indian context along with the consciousness that English is the passage to all inter-national connections has propelled it to the position of the unofficial national language. English is the chosen medium of creative expression and Indian writing in English today is world acclaimed. The argument for English as an Indian language is highly defensible and irrefutable. In this context translation as a medium and method of studying English in the present day India is losing its relevance and becoming an innecessity.

Translation is basically an exercise that aims to make clear the meaning of something that has been expressed in another language; therefore, it delivers the idea sans the original essence. It is like serving orange juice without the flavour of oranges whatsoever or rather, in the flavour of apples. The wholesomeness of the translated text is bound to be completely under doubt of authenticity and genuineness. The act of translation if it is to be true to the original is a rather obligatory one that changes the writing or speech from one language to another or even from one form to

another. English poet and translator Dryden, in the seventeenth century, had cautioned against the license of imitation: 'When a painter copies from the life...he has no privilege to alter features and lineaments' (Kasperek,84). So much for an understanding of the words in an apparent and plain way but how successfully does an appreciation of the literary elements of the translated language fit into this scheme of things?

Translation has been upheld as a very effective tool for inter-lingual exchange of ideas and concepts but this moves us away from the literary and enters the socio-cultural context and has not much to do with the learning of the source language. There is an intimate relationship between society, culture and language and the process of translation becomes more of an extra-linguistic negotiation than a linguistic operation. My argument in this paper is about the necessity or not of the application of translation as a tool for the learning of the translated language, in this case English, in the contemporary Indian context or rather whether translation is necessary at all? Translation as a practice is more a process of decontextualisation and recontextualisation where the translator unavoidably superimposes upon the original text his own interpretation of it. Moreover, translation as a practice is impossible without a proficiency in both the languages which comes only after the learning process has already been undertaken and completed to a sufficient level. Hence, translation which no doubt is a difficult exercise and the translator an artist in their own right, cannot pose to teach the learner the basics of the translated language. Yes, translation does succeed in achieving the opposite effect of enriching the target language with those untranslatable words which become valuable calques and loanwords.

Translation can be of two types or on two levels. In fact the term metaphrasis which is the Greek term for translation and literally means 'a speaking across' has given rise to the concept of metaphrase- a literal word-to-word translation of the source text. In contrast to this is the concept of paraphrase which means 'a saying in other words' and in recent terminology it corresponds to dynamic equivalence. This dynamic equivalence is one which involves a re-interpretation and re-texting of the source text into the target –text. Metaphrase or formal equivalence involves a translation of word to word into the target language. Both these methods pose problems in proving their importance and necessity in forwarding the learning of the source language.

Let us take up the paraphrase method. This which is the higher rank of translation activity, also referred to as the idiomatic method, involves an exchange not only of linguistic but socio-cultural elements. Edward Sapir discusses how the language habits of a community governs its experience and therefore each separate linguistic structure represents a separate entity and therefore it would be dangerous for the translator to treat the text in isolation from the culture. Sapir studied the intricate and intimate relationship between language and culture and discovered an interesting relation between linguistic differences and difference in cultural world views. Translation work is closely linked to a given culture and in the decoding and recoding involved therein, more than a mere replacement of lexical and syntactical elements takes place. The artistic /creative procedures located in the cultural context within which the text is created must be taken into account by the translator. This process of translation does not and cannot emphasize equivalence; rather it aims at a negotiation of meaning and a ferrying across of a system of values and consciousness. Transcreation of meanings is what is involved in a translation of this level and it may even be a new writing in its own right. Translation is gradually becoming an art in itself and a separate field of study. The problem that arises in adopting this method as a medium of study of a language and culture (here English) is that because translation recreates or recontextualizes the entire cultural structure and ethos of the source text and language, how does it remain a window to the culture and language to be studied? Cultural untranslatability is the major problem faced by a translator. A text contains meanings closely inter-twined with the cultural context and the difficulty for the translator is to find an exact situational parallel. The translated text is a result of the power of interpretation of the translator, on the lexical, semantic, syntactical and pragmatic levels. Octavio Paz is right in considering translation to be an invention and a rather unique act--- a fine example of this practice of translation is Harivansh Rai Bachchan's *Macbeth*. Bachchan has successfully transported the message of the original, taking the liberty of the translator to translate the cultural signifiers like legends, myths, folk-lore and even linguistic expressions by means of transplantation. What Bachchan is doing is exploiting the creative potentiality of the translator, replacing the English sensibility with the Indian one and thereby he has totally appropriated the foreign text to Indian culture, at the same

time asserting the uniqueness of Indian culture and the adaptability of his language with the source language and culture. Bachchan has also suggested a resistance to the hegemony of Western literary traditions by reasserting the indigenous ways of drama writing. The skill with which such translations dissolve the binary opposition between the original and translated text by the process of hybridization and the creation of a contact zone where the two cultures meet as separate entities but willing to share a space of exchange and renegotiation, renders the translated text more of an indigenous work than a translated one. The only link that remains is what Octavio Paz claims of a translated text that though each text is unique yet at the same time it is only the translation of another text. So now, are we to study Bachchan's *Macbeth* for an understanding of Shakespeare or do we actually relish it as an excellent composition in its own right? Indubitably, translation brings in the note of destabilization of the source text, introducing the element of contestation and renewal, thus proving to be inadequate as an authentic source of study of any language and culture. The issue of fidelity to the translated text has been passed over and what remains is the 'indirect discourse' shown by Voloshinov in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. It is a mistake, argues Voloshinov, to attempt to study language abstractly and synchronically (i.e. in an unhistorical manner), as Saussure does. Words, for Voloshinov, are dynamic social signs, which take different meanings for different social classes in different historical contexts (Wikipedia)

The secondary method of translation which is the inferior of the two, though referred to as the more faithful one, only because it does not introduce any distortion of the source text, is generally employed for commercial purposes and is responsible for a lot of mis-education. Texts prescribed for study in schools and colleges are translated into the regional languages in the most inaccurate manner and the result is not the dissemination of knowledge but the creation of confusion and misconception in the mind of the hapless students. Take a look at the translation of this line from Shaw's *Arms and the Man* where Raina tells her mother "Don't mamma: the poor darling is worn out..." It appears in Hindi as "rahne do ma, wah bechara mera pyara thaka huwa hai" (Sharma, 40-41). The problem here is not only with finding the exact equivalent of the word 'darling' but also the European culture of using this intimate term of endearment with an openness not easily accepted in Indian culture. Incompetent translators try to produce a literal translation, adhering as closely as possible to the source-text and the result is an unidiomatic text amounting almost to nonsense. While trying to learn a language through translation is like having a half-way ticket, attempting to learn from an incompetent translator misses the bus entirely. What can be the translation of familiar English idioms like a bolt from the blue? or ...raining cats and dogs? Translation exercises are not the most appropriate ones for students and learners in the initial stage who have not acquired a proficiency in both the languages. Competent translators are those who have an excellent understanding of the etymological and idiomatic nuances of both, the source language as well as the target language and also a finely tuned sense of when to paraphrase and when to paraphrase. In other words an efficient translator has to be not just bilingual but bicultural too because a language is not merely a set of grammatical and syntactical rules but a system of cultural references, and mastery over it, in the words of linguist Mario Pei, 'comes close to being a lifetime job' (pg.424). The complex task of translation requires an experienced person, who cannot arbitrarily delete parts of the original text or assume the role of a censor. Thus the study of any language through incompetent translations is fraught with dangers and risk, more so for new learners who may depend on inaccurate interpretations for their own learning. Teaching or learning through translations has disadvantages which may hamper the acquisition of correct language skills. Mainly, learning through translation gives rise to the habit of thinking in one language and transferring the thoughts to another thereby bringing in interference and inaccuracy in expression. It also creates the difficulty of working compatibility between the teacher and student working in two separate languages. Further, a misconception is formed about the two languages having a perfect one to one correspondence and generally any serious effort to learn the other language is thwarted as translation confines language practice to reading and writing only. As Angeles Carreres has put forward, learning through translation is counter-productive as it forces learners always to view the foreign language through the mother tongue and inhibits free expression in the new language.

The status of English in Indian social and academic life needs to be understood. English studies in translation is no more necessary considering the fact that English is one of the Indian languages today, co-existing with and being used more effectively than the regional languages. English literary studies have suffered as there has been a

conscious polarization of English which has not been treated on equal grounds with the other Indian languages. It has been given the tag of exclusivity and superiority thus limiting its study right from the basic level to a select section of society. Added to this is the politics of cultural revivalism which has always sought to overthrow English as an alien tongue, the mother tongue vs. other-tongue debate raging on and preventing the integration of English into the primary education system, though it has permeated the living culture of India deeply. This has resulted in the failure of English as a language and literature to reach the common masses of people and the dependence on poor quality translations is being passed off as academics in schools and universities all over the country. Translated works of high class are an excellent way of reaching out to the literatures of the world but are of use only to those who pursue these studies with the purpose of self-education or literary oriented readers. For those average learners with the specific aim of learning the language and literature in syllabus oriented courses translated texts may not be the best method.

In conclusion, there are a few issues that need to be resolved in order to smooth the path of English education in India and to determine the position of English as a medium of instruction and education, assuming that it already has been elevated to the status of the most easily accepted link language all over India. The traditional view that English is the language of colonial hegemony requires to be countered by the argument and proof that it is also the language of anti-colonial resistance. The argument is simple-if English is the language of dominance, why encourage its study and if it is the key to resistance and democratisation why study it through translation instead of first hand? English should be unveiled of foreignness and be introduced uniformly at primary school level, through state jurisdiction, whereby importance is given to the learning and acquisition of skills in English, to do away with the issues of students facing a stumbling block in English at higher levels of education. Easy availability and a standardisation of texts for study at college and university levels should be implemented to curb the mushrooming of shoddily translated texts that have vitiated and corrupted the academic atmosphere. Contemporary literary study emphasizes the reading and analysis of text and only the text, Cleanth Brooks candidly announcing: 'paraphrase is a heresy'

*the word intends to denote the negative or opposite of "necessity"

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