

# Context, Culture, and Clarity: A Comparative Framework for Literary and Technical Theories in Translation Studies

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the field of translation studies has undergone a significant paradigmatic shift, moving from a primarily linguistic orientation toward a broader cultural and interdisciplinary perspective. This evolution has contributed to the emergence of translation studies as a cross-disciplinary field that draws upon insights from linguistics, psychology, education, philosophy, and cultural studies. Bassnett & Lefevere (1998), Johnson (1986), Williams & Chesterman (2002). Nevertheless, as a relatively old discipline characterized by its trans-cultural and cross-disciplinary nature, translation studies continue to lack a distinctive theoretical and methodological framework of its own. Consequently, it must incorporate theories and research methodologies from related disciplines to build a more comprehensive intellectual foundation. Despite these advances, the field still faces considerable challenges before achieving full recognition as an autonomous academic discipline. One of its core tasks is to continuously expand its research scope and explore new methodological and philosophical directions.

Translation, as both a practice and a theory, exists at the intersection of language, meaning, and cultural negotiation. It is not merely a linguistic act but a philosophical and political one; raising the essential question not of existence, but of meaning. Central to this inquiry is the multiplicity of meaning: whether meaning is singular, layered, or infinitely interpretable. The translator operates within a series of linguistic, cultural, and ethical constraints, navigating what may be described as a “tunnel of expectation” in the reconstruction or deconstruction of meaning. Viewed as a (sub) set of world literature, translation straddles the space between literary creativity and technical precision.

This study interrogates the distinctions and intersections between literary and technical translation, questioning whether literary translation constitutes a superficial generalization of cultural knowledge, or whether technical translation is mistakenly perceived as a purely mechanical exercise for bilingual individuals. It also addresses

the ethical considerations inherent in the act of translation, recognizing the translator's responsibility in transferring not only language but also the cultural, emotional, and contextual depth embedded within texts. Drawing from English, Tamil, and other borrowed linguistic traditions, this research seeks to uncover the subjective dimensions within ostensibly objective practices through a critical comparative framework. By engaging both translation theory and practice as analytical lenses, the study aims to elucidate how translation is conceptualized, interpreted, and ethically negotiated within an evolving trans-cultural academic landscape.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature(s)**

While there is abundant scholarship on either literary or technical translation individually, direct comparative studies are limited. Existing research often privileges one domain (e.g., literary theories of domestication/foreignization, or technical concerns with terminology management). Few studies systematically explore the context, culture, and clarity function across both domains. This gap underscores the importance of framing a comparative approach that evaluates the aesthetic, pragmatic, and ethical dimensions of translation together.

### **Comparative Frameworks**

Snell-Hornby (1988) argues for an “integrated approach” in translation studies, suggesting that rigid divisions between literary and technical translation are artificial and counterproductive. However, other scholars Byrne (2006), Schäffner (1998) stress that methodological and pedagogical frameworks for technical translation must remain distinct due to differing goals, audiences, and consequences. Recent scholarship seeks a middle ground, emphasizing functional approaches. Skopos theory Vermeer (1989) proposes that the purpose of translation should determine strategies, allowing both literary and technical texts to be assessed within a broader communicative framework.

### **Research Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative and comparative design that looks closely at how literary and technical translations work, differ, and overlap. The aim is to understand not just how words are transferred from one language to another, but how meaning, culture, and ethics travel through translation. Instead of treating translation as a purely linguistic act, this design approaches it as a cultural and interpretive process. By comparing different types of translations, the research seeks to identify where creativity meets precision and where the translator's role becomes that of both artist and technician.

The study draws on several well-known thinkers in translation and postcolonial studies to shape its approach. The theoreticians of post colonialism guide the understanding

of translation as a political and cultural act. Their ideas help frame translation as a space where identity, power, and culture interact. Alongside this, Hans Vermeer's Skopos theory offers a practical grounding by focusing on the purpose of translation, reminding us that every translation choice should depend on its intended goal and audience. Together, these perspectives help the research move beyond surface-level linguistic analysis toward a deeper examination of why and how translation decisions are made.

## **Primary Sources**

The study focuses on texts originally written in English, Tamil, and a few other languages that have available translated versions. These texts are divided into two main types: Literary works such as poems, short stories, and essays that rely on emotion, rhythm, and cultural expression. Technical works such as manuals, research articles, or legal documents that depend on precision and clarity. These texts were chosen because they reflect real examples of how translators manage and problematic between meaning and accuracy across very different contexts.

## **Secondary Sources**

In addition to the primary texts, the research also reviews theoretical writings and studies in translation. Scholars like Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Lawrence Venuti, Jody Byrne, and Snell-Hornby provide the foundation for understanding both the literary and technical sides of translation. Their works offer valuable insights into how translators navigate culture, context, and audience.

The analysis has two main stages: Content Analysis – This stage looks at how words, style, tone, and cultural meanings are handled in translation. The focus is on comparing how translators approach ambiguity, symbolism, and clarity. Comparative Analysis – here, literary and technical translations are placed side by side to identify key differences and overlaps. The comparison explores: How context affects translation choices, how cultural elements are carried or adapted, and how clarity and creativity are negotiated in each case. Together, these analyses help uncover how each type of translation reflects a distinct set of expectations and challenges. Translation is never neutral. Every choice a translator makes, what to include, what to leave out, or how to adapt meaning, carries ethical weight and obviously it is the political consideration of “protecting” the “authenticity” of a language. This study recognizes the translator's responsibility not just to the text but also to the culture and community behind it. The research process is guided by respect for original authors, languages, and cultural contexts. Ethical awareness here also ties into the idea of the “politics of translation,” where translation becomes an act of negotiation between power, identity, and meaning.

## Limitation of the research

The study focuses on a limited number of English and Tamil examples, therefore its findings may not apply universally to all languages or translation fields. Because the approach is qualitative, the results are interpretive rather than statistical. However, the depth of analysis aims to offer meaningful insights that could inspire broader studies or interdisciplinary approaches in the future.

### 1. Context in Translation

Context is a decisive factor in distinguishing literary and technical translation. In literary translation, context encompasses narrative style, symbolism, intertextuality, and the author's artistic intention (Bassnett, 2002). Literary translators must navigate ambiguity, metaphor, and multiple interpretations, often balancing fidelity to the source text with aesthetic resonance in the target language. Venuti (1995) In technical translation, context is primarily functional and pragmatic. Byrne (2012) Technical texts, manuals, scientific papers, and legal documents demand precision and unambiguous communication. Context here refers to specialized domains, standard terminology, and compliance with professional norms. Thus, while literary translation thrives on polysemy and interpretive openness, technical translation prioritizes clarity and adherence to domain-specific discourse. The below words are commonly compressed with the daily usages, but the context cannot be identified with the below.

preparation = 1. தயாரிப்பு 2. ஆயத்தம்

value = 1. பெறுமதி 2. விழுமியம்

pressure = 1. அழுத்தம் 2. நிர்ப்பந்தம்

reflective = 1. பிரதிபலிக்கும் 2. சிந்திக்கும்

A sentence in English or Tamil or any language need a situation of information. Without the information of a situation these words are called polysemy. The rhetorical usage of polysemy is rich in literary text rather than technical one. Other example unanimously “ambiguity” in both language intentionally.

The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

#### CHAPTER IV

#### LANGUAGE

18. 4[(1)]The Official Language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala.

5[(2) Tamil shall also be an official language.

(3) English shall be the link language.

(4) Parliament shall by law provide for the implementation of the provisions of this Chapter.]

இலங்கைச் சனநாயக சோசலிசக் குடியரசின் அரசியலமைப்பு

அத்தியாயம் IV

மொழி

அரசகரும மொழி.

18. [(1)] இலங்கையின் அரசகரும மொழி சிங்கள மொழியாதல் வேண்டும்.

\*\* [(2) தமிழும் அரசுகளும் மொழி ஒன்றாதல் வேண்டும்.

(3) ஆங்கிலம் இணைப்பு மொழியாதல் வேண்டும்.

(4) பாராளுமன்றம் சட்டத்தின் மூலம் இவ்வத்தியாயத்தின் ஏற்பாடுகளை நடைமுறைப்படுத்துவதற்கு ஏற்பாடு செய்தல் வேண்டும்.]

The context of the constitution is still a question mark. But the translation is nationally accepted. The question here is whether the language choice is correct or the conjunction usage is correct or Tamil contextualization is correct? What is understood from ஒன்றாதல் வேண்டும். This context is in two degrees. Are the translators forget to put the question mark or are they hiding the intonation? This is the major intentional crime which I presume as ethical consideration that needs to be questioned has not been so far.

## 2. Culture in Translation

The role of culture has been central in translation theory. Literary translation is deeply embedded in cultural transfer. Susan Bassnett (2002) and André Lefevere (1992) emphasize that translating literature inevitably involves negotiating cultural identity, power relations, and ideological positioning. Lawrence Venuti (1995) further critiques the “invisibility” of translators in Western traditions, highlighting how cultural choices affect reception. Technical translation, while often seen as culturally neutral, is not entirely free from cultural factors. Research by Jody Byrne (2006) and Kingscott (1996) shows that technical texts can reflect culturally specific conventions, for instance, units of measurement, legal systems, or medical terminology. Moreover, as Olohan (2016) notes, the global circulation of scientific knowledge requires cultural standardization (e.g., SI units, ISO standards), yet translators must remain sensitive to local variations. Therefore, culture influences both domains, albeit in different intensities: literary translation foregrounds cultural interpretation, whereas technical translation incorporates cultural adaptation in service of functional clarity. For example:

There was the girl, screaming like an angry bird,

When it finds its nest left empty and little ones gone.

Just like that she screamed, seeing the body

Naked, crying and cursing the ones that had done it. (38 words)

(Sophocles -496-406 BC-, The Theban Plays, Antigone, Lines 425-8, Translated by: E.F.Watling, Penguin, UK, 1974, p.137).

This particular piece has another translation

She wailed out loud

that sharp sound of bitterness

a bird makes when she looks in her nest.

It's empty, it's a widow's bed,

and the baby chicks are gone.

And this girl,

when she saw the corpse was bare,  
she cried that same way and groaned and mourned for it.

And she prayed hard curses on the one who did that to it. (64 words)

முதலாவது ஆங்கில மொழிபெயர்ப்பில் இடம்பெறாத ஒரு விடயம் (it's a widow's bed) இரண்டாவது ஆங்கில மொழிபெயர்ப்பில் இடம்பெற்றுள்ளது. ஆகவே இரண்டாவது மொழிபெயர்ப்பை நாம் தமிழ்ப்படுத்திப் பார்க்கலாம்.

குஞ்சுகள் வெளியேற  
விதவையின் படுக்கையைப் போல்  
கூடு வெறிச்சோட  
வெதும்பி ஓலமிடும் குருவியைப் போல்  
ஓலமிட்டாள் ஒரு சிறுமி.  
உயிர் பிரிந்த உடலின்  
உடை உரிந்து சென்றவரை  
திட்டினாள் வெற்றுடலை  
நினைந்து விம்மினாள்,  
நொந்து கலங்கினாள்  
வெந்து புலம்பினாள். (28 சொற்கள்) மணி வேலுப்பிள்ளை(2025).

இங்கு பேசப்படும் உடலும் உயிரும் கூடும் பறவையும் சிந்தையில் தென்படும் வேளையில் வேறொரு குறள் உள்ளத்தை உறுத்துகிறது:

குடம்பை தனித்துஒழியப் புட்பறந் தற்றே  
உடம்போடு உயிரிடை நட்பு (338).

முட்டைக்குள் இருக்கும் குஞ்சு அதனை உடைத்துப் பறந்து செல்கிறது. அவ்வாறே உடலை விடுத்து உயிர் பிரிந்து செல்கிறது. முட்டைக்கும் குஞ்சுக்கும் உள்ள உறவெல்லாம் குஞ்சு வெளியேறும்வரையே. அத்தகைய குறுகிய உறவே உடலுக்கும் உயிருக்கும் இடையே நிலவுகிறது! இதற்கோர் ஆங்கில மொழிபெயர்ப்பு:

Like a bird's to the shell it leaves

Is a life's link to its body (15 nrhw;fs;). (P.S.Sundaram, The Kural, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p.52).

The variations among the choices of words are based on the plural context where the translator belongs and the culture which the translator believes.

### 3. Clarity (Accuracy) Translation

The notion of clarity distinguishes technical translation most sharply from literary translation. Technical translation emphasizes terminological consistency, grammatical precision, and readability. Scholars like Byrne (2012) argue that mistranslation in technical domains can lead to serious consequences (e.g., legal disputes, medical errors, engineering failures). Hence, clarity is not simply stylistic but also ethical, tied to end-user safety and professional responsibility. Literary translation, by contrast, often resists absolute clarity. Scholars such as Eco (2001) and Hermans (2007) note that ambiguity, wordplay, and aesthetic rhythm are essential to literary works. Here, “clarity” may even undermine the source text's richness, since literature thrives on

layered meanings and interpretive openness. Thus, while clarity is paramount in technical translation, in literary translation it is often negotiated or even deliberately suspended.

E.g: The probation service have found out that there are two types of person appearing before the courts – those who have problems and those who are problems, Simon Cohen, Magistrate, June 1983, The Globe and Mail, Toronto, 2007/02/27 (நீதிமன்றின்முன் தோன்றுவோர் இரண்டு வகையானோர் என்பதை நன்னடத்தைச் சேவைத் துறை கண்டறிந்துள்ளது. ஒரு வகையினரைப் பொறுத்தவரை, அவர்களுக்குப் பிரச்சனை உண்டு. மறு வகையினரைப் பொறுத்தவரை, பிரச்சனையே அவர்கள்தான்!).

The word probation service stands for வேலைத் திறமையைக் கண்டறியும் காலம், சோதனைக் காலம், தெரிந்தாயம் நிலை, நன்னடத்தை சோதனை நிலை. The word properly used in the target language நன்னடத்தைச் சேவைத் துறை the ethical consideration of choosing a word, and appropriate to the source to be precise, and the technical terminology to give the clarity is the foundational principal of a translator. This particular translation and the source is also applicable to the translator as well. This is metaphorical euphemism for the translators to commit to generate a correct translation.

The task of a translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay Spivak(1993). The logical, rhetorical, and sense is important in translation.

## Results and Findings

The findings of this study underscore fundamental distinctions as well as nuanced intersections between literary and technical translation. Literary translation emerges as an interpretive act marked by polysemy, cultural embeddedness, and aesthetic negotiation. Translators in this domain must engage deeply with symbolic meaning, narrative structure, and stylistic nuance, often prioritizing cultural resonance over literal accuracy. Conversely, technical translation is shown to prioritize terminological precision, clarity, and functional consistency. Yet, the research reveals that technical translation is not devoid of cultural dimensions; even scientific and legal texts reflect culturally specific standards, requiring contextual awareness by the translator. Moreover, the notion of clarity, often treated as a defining feature of technical translation, is found to be ethically consequential rather than merely stylistic. Literary translation, in contrast, sometimes resists clarity to preserve ambiguity and richness. The comparative approach also reveals that both domains are guided by purpose, audience, and interpretive strategy, supporting functionalist models like Skopos theory. Ultimately, the study identifies that translation is shaped by both the intention of the original text and the interpretive position of the translator, reaffirming the centrality

of the “politics of translation” as a metaphor for the power dynamics and cultural negotiations inherent in the act.

## Conclusion

This research confirms that the binary distinction between literary and technical translation is both necessary and limited. While these domains differ significantly in terms of purpose, audience, and linguistic strategy, they are united by the translator’s ethical responsibility and interpretive agency. Literary translation requires deep cultural engagement and aesthetic sensitivity, while technical translation demands accuracy, consistency, and awareness of pragmatic consequences. However, both fields are shaped by context, cultural specificity, and the translator’s own position within the communicative act. By employing a comparative framework, this study contributes to bridging the theoretical gap between these domains, urging for a more integrated approach that respects their differences while exploring their intersections. The metaphor of the “politics of translation” encapsulates the broader implication of the translator’s role, not only as a linguistic mediator but also as a cultural negotiator whose choices shape how knowledge, identity, and meaning are transferred across boundaries. This calls for a re-reading of translation not just as a technical process or a literary craft, but as a critical practice embedded in global communication and cultural exchange.

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