

The Function of Translation in Culture: Transforming Tamil Culture via English for Sinhala

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ABSTRACT : An attempt made in this paper to present the function of translation in culture of modern Sri Lankan society and to discuss the attitudes of different community in the society through translation. Translation is mostly referred to as the act of transforming the data of a source language into a target language. In this process, the culture plays a major role between two languages, Sinhala and Tamil. The translator's knowledge on these two languages is of great significance since the minor change has the capacity to change the intended meaning of the original text. Further a brief historical view of the position occupied by language during the period of Independence and after the Swabasha education policy in Sri Lanka is presented. As a result of this policy, the role of English as a link language gains importance for transforming the cultures to both the societies. Generally the function of translation in Tamil culture has been making over to Sinhala society via English. The societal, cultural attitudes too have been responsible for the position of translation. This article discusses some of the cultural aspects of Tamil and Sinhala societies. The overall findings of this analysis contribute to have a better understanding within the societies through English translation.

Key Words : translation, source language, Swabasha, culture, transform, societal attitude

1.1 Translation: It's Importance

Language is the most creative form of communication. In terms of culture, it is most reverend and transmitted from generation to generation. Language is central to education and is the key to the understanding of knowledge. Each language has its own speech community and its own cultural and linguistic heritage. It is humanly impossible to know all the languages spoken in the world; one can acquire knowledge on some of the languages. Translation is an effective that means for communication among different speech communities which speak different languages. Translation leans heavily on the consciousness and awareness of the translator about the cultural context, in which the source text or material was written and the context into which it is to be fabricated. So translation often manifests remarkably the similarity and differences between cultures and civilizations of source language and target language.

By using the translated materials available in one's own language, it is possible for knowing about the culture of the new speech community. Translation helps to get relieved from the burden of learning a new language. As translation handles the complex job of transferring information in one language into another language effectively, it deserves to be put into vigorous research and various case studies. The job of a translator is really a challenging one. Though a translator cannot be equated with a creative writer, his work cannot be underestimated as he renders a great service. We could know about the great works of literature like Bible, Mahabharatha, Ramayana and Bhagavat Gita only through translation. These works have been translated into a number of different languages of the world.

There are no genetically inherited characteristics in terms of which we can differentiate Sinhalese from Tamils. We are different because we generally speak different languages, and the majority follows different religions. We also need to acknowledge that our culture has borrowed much from both North and South India in the spheres of music, dance and literature. More over the main deities respected in the Buddhist temples originate from the Hindu Pantheon. Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus are generally considered to be mutually exclusive groups. The languages are actually more similar to each other than one may think. The Sinhala language (although its vocabulary is predominantly Sanskrit), has a very close affinity, both in grammar and syntax to the Tamil language structure. However, the differences in language as well as in some other cultural elements, between Sinhalese and Tamils, have become the basis for different national identities, has perceived by the mass of the two people.

An attempt is made in this paper to present briefly the function of translation in culture in modern Sri Lankan society and to discuss transforming some aspects of Tamil via English for Sinhala.

1.2 Previous Works on Translation

Over the years, particularly after independence, the societal attitudes towards translation have differed in some marked ways in the two major societies. The Tamil speaking communities have shown their interest in learning Sinhala, in reading Sinhala literature, and also in translating the same into Tamil. They learned Sinhala mainly, because it was made the (only) official language in the late 1950s and had become socially dominant, so that they were compelled to

learn it for their official existence, what up to now has been encouraged through the government translation department. The literary works, educational literature and state official documents have come into a new phase because of the developing political, social, cultural, linguistic and attitudinal network of these societies as a dynamic communicative tool.

During the period of independence and after the Swabasha education policy in Sri Lanka, the role of English as a link language gains importance for inter-ethnic dialogue. Although Sinhala and Tamil have a long literary history of their own, Tamil literature has greatly influenced in Sinhala literature during the middle ages. Sinhala scholars like Peter Silva (1961), Hettiarachchi (1969), Sugathapala de Silva (1969), and Godakumbura (1950) recognized the influence of Tamil on the structure and lexicon.

In order to better see the past, the official language dept was carried out some works on translation. They were translating official documents only for administrative purposes not for national integration. Most of the works were translated through English by intellectuals and state officers. Generally the status and functions of translation in the society have been and are governed by the language policy of the government. The societal, cultural attitudes too have been responsible for the position of translation.

1.3 Swabasha in Language Policy

At independence, the successor states in South Asia confronted the crucial issue of deciding which language or languages should replace English, as the language of administration in education, in the law courts, in short, as the official language. In Sri Lanka the main policy decisions on changes in language and education policy had been taken in the late 1930's and early 1940's in the last decade of British rule in the island. In May 1944, the national legislature adopted a policy resolution to the effect that Sinhala and Tamil should replace English as the official language within a reasonable time. A change in the medium of instruction in schools from an emphasis on the use of English to Swabasha, the two main indigenous languages Sinhalese and Tamil were a central issue in the controversies in education reform in this period. But language policy was much wider in scope and potential impact on public life than that. In practice, introduction of Swabasha education policy leads to monolingual society.

After independence Sri Lankan government had to evolve language policy to meet the national demands. It had to decide on language use for official purposes. The question was whether to decide to use both the major languages, Sinhala and Tamil, for official purposes or to use Sinhala alone. As long as the use of English continued, there wasn't any language problem between the two major communities. Language together with religion, history, and culture formed the major components of nationalism. Cultural re-generation was uppermost in the minds of nationalists.

1.4 Language and Culture in Translation

Culture has been defined as the sum of transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thoughts characteristic of a community or population. These characteristics are all transmitted by language; they are not inherited through the genes.

Culture and language are so tightly related that they may be regarded as parts of the same thing. No case is known of either a language or a culture existing without the other. Obviously, no language can survive in isolation and no civilization can be built up without language. Cultural changes tend to occur along with changes in language; the two proceed reinforcing each other. Today the language has been secularized and desacralized the earlier mythical origins for each language Tamil, Sanskrit and Telegu may be analytically even Sinhala have lost their traditional purpose.

As Indo-Aryan dialects changed over the years into different languages like Gujarati, Marathi, Sinhalese, Punjabi, Bengali, Assamese, etc., the cultural patterns got differentiated. Emanating from one common source, Aryan culture, these are today markedly different cultures like Gujarati culture, Sinhalese culture, Marathi culture etc. Even one speech community, there are cultural variations in terms of region, class, caste, profession, etc.

Sri Lankan Tamil Society has a very large number of lexical items pertaining to Palmyra culture. Palmyra has been for long part and parcel of the Jaffna rural agriculturists' life. People made use of Palmyra maximally for their livelihood and even now they derive a great number of benefits from it in various forms. So the Sinhala people refer to Jaffna Tamils jokingly as *panan ko TTaiyaa* 'seed of palmyra'

Example:

<i>vaTali</i>	- young palmyra
<i>umal</i>	- bag made of palmyra leaves
<i>kallakkaaram</i>	- palmyra sugar candy
<i>oTiyal</i>	- dried palmyra root.

This palmyra culture is entirely different from Sinhala society. The social meaning or values attributed to certain usages are different from their normal meanings.

If culture is knowledge in broad sense, one can ask whether it is socially acquired knowledge. Hudson (1980) makes the following distinction:

- Cultural knowledge which is acquired from people.
- Shared non-cultural knowledge which is shared by all human beings but not learned from others.
- Non shared, non cultural knowledge which is unique to the individual.

In this schema, some parts of language belong to cultural knowledge: some parts like dimensions, directions, etc, are not learned from human beings; some are highly individualistic like "I like the smell of paint, of new books", or 'I don't think that nations exist', etc.

It may be said that knowledge, cultural and language are interrelated on a number of dimensions. In Socio-linguistics, we must try to study the following:

- How do languages and cultures differ from one another?
- Do they differ arbitrarily and unrestrictively from one another?
- Are there any universals in thought and culture that are reflected in language?

Each language imposes its own grid on the language users' experience and it provides a set of pigeon- holes, in terms of which the users of a particular language reduce the world of experience and knowledge to order. People use their own language to put labels on all observable phenomena and they are conditioned to see only the objects and ideas, that can be expressed in the language. For example, consider the pronominal system of Tamil. It makes use of different degrees of politeness in addresser addressee interaction as given below:

2nd person singular in Tamil:

nii informal, intimate, impolite (you- non honorific singular)

niir formal, not intimate, polite

nimkaL very polite (you- honorific singular/plural)

2nd person singular in Sinhala:

oya you- polite singular

umba you - impolite

tamuse you - less polite

tamaa command (using in the courts etc.)

Although Tamil and Sinhala show a good deal of similarity in grammatical and cultural aspects, there are striking differences too. The pronominal system of the languages is a good example.

English uses only 'you' for all the three. Does it mean that English users are incapable of expressing different degrees of politeness? Is there anything semantically lacking in the English speaker who uses only one pronoun 'you' correspond too many pronouns. Does it mean that English, Tamil and Sinhala chop up the world in different ways?

The greetings of different cultures viewed in their original meanings, indicate different concerns. The Arabic *salaam* means 'peace'; the English *Hello* originated in 'Healthy be thou'; the Sinhala *aayboovan* means ' may you live long' (a form of respect), and the Tamil '*vaNakkam*' means a prayer to God or person, these greetings express a basic concern for the other person's well-being, although some are spiritual and some are physical in content.

Each language forces its users into a particular mental mould, the following questions arise,

- How is it possible to translate an idea in one language into another, if the structure of reality is totally different in each language?
- Does it mean that if a word is not available in a language, the concept represented by that particular word is also not available?

Social aspects of the modern society are reflected in the language they speak. *ar* is added to proper names (male names only) ending in vowels to indicate respect: *yooku* + *ar* becomes *yookar*. These vowel ending proper names without the additional suffix *ar* are thought of as indicating only medial respect. Pronouncing a proper name ending in *an* will be generally considered as showing disrespect for the person bearing that name. Therefore speakers

substitute *an* with *ar* which marks respect, *cellappan* becomes *cellappar* in their speech. Similarly proper names to denote respect, ending in-*aar*, *ponnampalam+aar* becomes *ponnampalattaar*. These are some of the differences focusing the gradations of respect. It would be rather difficult to predict in Sinhala. So these aspects are translated through English.

Most languages have a network of kinship terms. They have different terms for,

Tamil	Sinhala	English
1. <i>cittappa</i> <i>cinnayyaa</i>	<i>ba:ppa</i> <i>kudappaa</i>	father's brother
2. <i>citti</i> <i>cinnamma</i>	<i>punci ammaa</i> <i>kudammaa</i>	mother's sister <i>kunciammaa</i>
3. <i>maama</i>	<i>maama</i>	father's, sister's husband. Father in-law
<i>maama</i> (<i>taaymaama</i>)	<i>maama</i>	mother's brother

English, on the other hand, manages with one multipurpose term 'uncle' and 'aunty'. Does this mean that Sinhala and English is poorer than Tamil. While the Chinese make no distinction between 'he' and 'she' in the spoken language, they are obviously aware of the differences between male and female.

- A multilingual person has control of two or more languages. He can switch from one language to another in terms of functions. How do the two languages shape his world view?

1.4.1 Untranslatable Cultural Features

There are some cultural features too which are not adequately translatable or are untranslatable due to the cultural differences which are always reflected in a language. Culturally changed lexical items, idioms, similies and proverbs come under this category. For example, Sinhala lexical items like *sil* (fasting), *pirit* (sthostira) and *po:ya* (fullmoon day) are linguistic as well as cultural signs which have specific meanings deeply rooted in Buddhist culture. These meanings in their full sense cannot be conveyed to non-Buddhist readers in a language like Tamil. Tamil has no equivalents for these lexical items and they have to be borrowed.

Example:

There is a Tamil proverb *tervil tenkaayay eTuttu valiyil piLLaiyaarukku utaittal*. It literally means, 'to take the coconut found on the street and offer it to God Ganesha'. Its closest English proverb may be: *Do not rob Peter to pay Paul*. Note that these of all phrases, terms, etc., are significantly absent in other religion's culture. Thus, as Catford(1995:105) prints out the "Cultural untranslatability" that we face is ultimately describable in all cases as a variety of linguistic untranslatability.

Expressions such as *tathaastu collu*, *caattup paTi*, *aalaatti eTu*, and *muuTu mantiram* are also used idiomatically. During certain contexts or religious rituals the chief priest utters certain mantras and his assistants say *tathaastu* 'may it be so' at the end of each utterance (*slooka*). The context perhaps special enquiry as to what '*tathaastu*' means from the priest have made the ordinary villagers to understand the contextual meaning of this particular utterance so much. They have picked up this phrase and it as an idiom in their day to day interactions to mean 'to play a second fiddle'.

As the latter kind of cultural terms are enlivened, as it were, within the context of a given domain of human life, they carry different messages, implications and values along with them.

Words used to denote aspects like the division of day represent an analysis of the universe as grasped in different cultures. The words used in Tamil society, generally these may be compared with the words used in Sinhala.

Example:

In Tamil,

<i>karukkal</i>	- approximately an hour before dawn.
<i>viTiyappuram</i>	- dawn
<i>kaalamai</i>	- morning
<i>iLa neeram</i>	- approximately from 9.00 a.m to 11.00 a.m
<i>mattiyaanam</i>	- afternoon 12 O' clock
<i>matiyam</i>	- approximately from 3.00 p.m to 4.00 p.m
<i>pinneeram</i>	- evening
<i>mammal</i>	- approximately from 6.00 p.m to 7.00 p.m
<i>iravu, iraatiri</i>	- night
<i>cekkal</i>	- Approximately from 9.00 p.m to 10.00 p.m
<i>caaman, naTuc caamam</i>	- midnight.

In Sinhala,

<i>paandere</i>	- dawn
<i>utay</i>	- morning
<i>matiaane</i>	- 12 O' clock
<i>taval</i>	- afternoon
<i>havasa</i>	- evening
<i>gomman</i>	- approximately from 6.00 p.m to 7.00 p.m
<i>raa, raatiriya</i>	- night
<i>yaamaya, matiya yaamaya</i>	- midnight.

It is difficult for an average person in the society to understand the full significance, and such terms which are peculiar to Jaffna social life and culture (Suseendirajah: 1998). Due to the social and cultural differences one could expect difficulty when a concept expressed by the language of English.

The significance of such cultural term has to be identified within the source language context and then translated. The process naturally gets complicated when the translator attempts to mediate between two heterogeneous sensibilities which as conditioned by their own intrinsic value systems. The translator is thus entrusted with the grave responsibility of bridging the gap between the two cultural systems to facilitate understanding and appreciation of the other.

1.5 Importance of Social Context in Translation

Social context plays an important role in translation because the translation is a linguistic activity and the language and society are deeply related to each other. Every language reflects the socio-cultural behaviour of its speakers. One can say, every society gets expression through the language spoken by its translation, being a bilingual activity deals with two socio-cultural behaviour i.e socio-cultural context of the source language and the socio-cultural context of the target language. In the process of interaction of two languages, two societies or social groups interact with each other. The two languages (SL & TL) involved in any translation work, may be the languages of two linguistic groups or regions of the same society or nation like Tamil and Sinhala or may be the languages of different societies like Sinhala and English or Tamil and English. Their cultures may be similar or alien. For example the translation of a Tamil text into Sinhala is translation within the languages of same nation and cultures, but the translation

of Tamil or Sinhala text into English would be translation between the languages of two different cultures.

Many Anthropologists have discussed this concept of cultural translation and its problem as far as social anthropology is concerned. E.B. Taylor's famous definition of culture includes the following sentence, "culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capability and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Language has been seen as the vehicle of or expression of culture by anthropologists. In nineteenth and twentieth century's language has become central to the development of the notion of national cultures.

Another famous Anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss used linguistic models in his analysis of kinship structures. He sees marriage and kinship systems as a form of human communication. If we look at the situation of our national languages the picture is very clear.

Example:

The terms of reference for husband are several. In Tamil society, a person has a choice among several terms to identify his kinsmen and describe broadly the kind of relationship. But we don't know whether it is applicable or not in Sinhala society.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| <i>purusan</i> | - speech of the educated middle and upper middle class. |
| <i>avar</i> | - most polite and used most commonly by all. |
| <i>viiTTukkaaran</i> | - on the scale of politeness they are |
| <i>viiTTukka:rar</i> | only second to the term <i>avar</i> . |
| <i>manican</i> | - literally 'man' to refer to wife's expression displeasure, anger, disgust. |
| Husband <i>aal</i> | - literally 'person' more or less parallels the use of the term <i>manican</i> . |
| <i>kaTTinavan</i> | - person who tied the marriage badge called <i>taali</i> , term used mostly by the rural less educated. |
| <i>misTer</i> | - English word 'mister' pronounced by some as <i>misTer</i> . |

various contexts by the medium educated and some among the less educated sometimes adopt it as a jocular term to make fun.

Cultural equivalence is an approximate translation where a source language cultural word is transferred into target language cultural world. For example: *talaippaakai*, *taali*, *eeTu totakkutal* and *puuppuniiraaTTu*. These words and phrases are not translatable to Sinhala or in English. In Sinhala *accuru kiyaviima* is related to *eeTu toTakkutal* in Tamil. But this context differs from Tamil context. A *saiiva* child is never caused to write any letters in the Tamil alphabet until an auspicious ceremony called *eeTu toTakkutal* initiation to the alphabet is ceremoniously performed. This ceremony is mostly a religious one, usually done in a temple. It is a solemn and pious occasion for the child, parents, and other family members. The child is taken to a temple in the village on an auspicious day, the day of *vijayadasami* in the month of September or October every year being considered the most auspicious day, and introduced to the Tamil alphabet by the chief Brahmin priest of the temple.

Tamil	Sinhala	
<i>talaippaakai</i>	talappaava	- turban, head dress, headgear.
<i>taali</i>	---	- marriage badge
<i>pu:ppuniiraaTTu</i>	kotahalu	- holy bath on puberty

These are approximate cultural equivalents in English. Since they are not accurate, their translation uses are limited. All these need elaborate explanations based on culture to make them intelligible to target language.

1.6 Problems of Translator

The notion of enrichment of a culture/ language through translation is based upon humanistic world view. Both the disciplines also believe in the idea of "human nature". As far as the practice of translation and study of a translated work is concerned "culture" plays an important role. A translator or translation theorist too needs to know other cultures and languages. He too does the job of an anthropologist/ sociologist. He tries to perceive other cultures through the original text. Especially when it comes to the question of cultural terms the translator should exhibit the thorough knowledge of source language culture.

While translating he/she not merely transfers ideas of one language into another but also transfers the culture associated with that language into another language. The thoughts, beliefs, ideas, behaviour patterns, dreams, fantasies, desires, rituals and taboos of one linguistic group are shifted to the other

linguistic group in the pattern of expression relevant for the other group through translation.

Apart from these, another problem is the lack of competent translators. The translator's creative talent is also very important in the society. A good translator is not born but can be produced by proper training in translation techniques. There are also a few Sinhalese and Tamils likewise not competent in both the languages. So far translation activities have been mostly dependent on individual interest. Without institutional support it is not possible to achieve any progress in the kinds of translation.

1.7 Conclusion

In the light of what we have pointed out and discussed, we feel that some kind of re-thinking becomes essential for both the communities. Whatever reasons there are for learning Sinhala and Tamil, this opens the windows to the culture of both communities in Sri Lanka. In all these discussions some important issues have been clarified.

- In understanding the effect of the interaction among our cultures and languages that make contact and sharing of views is needed. For example, a monolingual thinks more clearly than a bilingual. Could we suggest that a bilingual or a multilingual is more tolerant than a monolingual because a bilingual knows that 'reality' can be processed and expressed in more than one way and that there are different cultures and different ways of looking at the universe around us? These analogical attitudinal studies will be very useful in understanding problems.
- English, whether we like it or not has become the linguistic medium in our post- colonial society. Some aspects of the alien culture and alien values imbibed through English, a vehicle of western culture through it in the process destroyed some aspect of our own traditional culture and values through translation.
- The success of a translation generally depends on the purpose for which it is undertaken, which in turn reflects the needs of the people for whom it is made. The translator's background and attitude always play a vital role in this respect.

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