

On *Cirâ* and *Pirâ*: Hajong proverbs in translation
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The translator, however, would ill-discharge his duty, if for the sake of avoiding ridicule, he sacrificed fidelity to the original. He must represent his author as he is, not as he should be to please the narrow taste of those entirely unacquainted with him. --*Kisari Mohan Ganguli, translator of the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into English [1883-1896]*.

Translation is a difficult business. During the process of translation, a text is taken out of its original cultural context (source culture) and placed in the context of a different culture (target culture). This may lead to a loss or change of the contextual clues that are necessary for an accurate interpretation of the piece of literature. Ganguli reminds us of the importance of representing the source text accurately, even at the expense of derision. While knowledge of and adaptation to the target culture is also important, the translator qua translator has an ethical duty to the original author, be s/he living or dead. The challenge is to walk a fine line between both source and target cultures. The translator must bear in mind that there is contextual information unavailable to the outsider. There are several possible responses to deal with this contextual gap between author and outsider:

1. literal translation: to translate only what is written in the original and leave the reader to his own devices in interpreting
2. adaptation: to add cultural/contextual information to the text to ensure an accurate interpretation at the risk of misrepresenting the text
3. annotated translation: to add cultural/contextual information in a preface, footnote or endnote and leave the reader to decide whether to access the information

Poetry is a particularly challenging subfield of translation. Not only does the translator have to pay attention to accuracy (knowing the source culture) and clarity (knowing the target culture), there is the added weight of aesthetics. The literary features of a source text become just as important as the literal meaning e.g. if meter is used in the original, then meter becomes important in the translation. An effort should be made to keep poetry as poetry.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first two deal with translation in general, whether prose or poetry. The third section is specific to poetic translation. The first section deals with the cultural values and artifacts of the source culture. The second deals with audience or target culture. The third deals with a few literary features.

Cultural Values and Artifacts

First and foremost, translation poses a challenge because cultural values and artifacts are not universal. The more distant one culture is from another, the more difficult the translation. For example, the author comes from a middle class urban environment in the USA. Many proverbs from a tribal group in rural Meghalaya contain references to artifacts unfamiliar to the author. The meaning of Hajong proverbs is missed when the audience has no concept of jackfruit, bamboo fences, rice beer, *dhotis*, the habits of an ox or tiger, etc., all of which are absent from the author's culture. Take as an example the following Hajong proverb:

<i>Bibak</i>	<i>bangos -la</i>	<i>tengol</i>	<i>na-hoi</i>
all	bamboo-gen	bamboo.tie	not-become
adj	n -case	n	neg-v

All bamboo cannot be made into tie strips (for fencing).

There are several difficulties in translating this for an American audience. First of all, urban Americans have probably never seen bamboo, except perhaps on TV, let alone bamboo fencing. All fences in the USA are made of metal, plastic, or lumber native to North America. Second, Americans cannot appreciate the importance of bamboo fencing. In a Hajong village, the bamboo fence is used to separate the owner's animals from strays and neighbors' animals. If the quality of bamboo is not good, the fence will not serve its purpose. Stray animals are very rare in urban America. For example, if anyone in urban America sees a dog without a collar, he or she will likely call Animal Control. These professional animal catchers will use poles and nets to capture the animal and take it to the pound, a place where animals are either adopted or put to death. For this reason, fences serve a different purpose in urban America. They are used primarily for privacy. Next, bamboo has various uses in Hajong society. Depending on the quality of the bamboo, it will be used differently. For fencing, some bamboo is used for the vertical strips, other is used for the horizontal beams, and yet other for tying. Americans cannot appreciate this. The meaning of the proverb is lost in translation because cultural values and artifacts are not universal.

Audience

The audience of a translation is another factor that needs to be considered. If the audience consists of anthropologists, the cultural artifacts should be retained. However, if the audience consists of philosophers, sometimes the wisdom of the proverb may be retained at the expense of the cultural artifacts. Take our example above (repeated below).

Bibak bangosla tengol nahoi.

All bamboo cannot be made into tie strips (for fencing).

An anthropologist would want to see photographs of a bamboo fence detailing all the various parts. A photograph of a *tengol* would fascinate her or him. However, for someone seeking wisdom literature, the appropriate translation of the Hajong proverb might be closer to the following:

All that glitters is not gold.

This is a common English proverb which communicates a very similar idea to the Hajong one. In both cases, one must be able to distinguish the quality of the substance. The person who can correctly judge the quality of bamboo or metal is highly prized in the society.

Take another example:

<i>gas-o-ni</i>	<i>kahol-ra,</i>	<i>ot-o-ni</i>	<i>tel-ra</i>
tree-also-in	jackfruit-DEF	lip-also-in	oil-DEF
n-adv-post	n-ART	n-adv-post	n-ART

While the jackfruit is still on the tree, there is already oil on the lip.

Again, the anthropologist or botanist would want to see a photograph of a jackfruit and its tree. For those

interested in the wisdom of the proverb, however, something is left to be desired. When the author first heard this proverb, he assumed it meant that the jackfruit has a Pavlovian effect of making a person salivate in anticipation of the delicious taste. However, as it was explained by a Hajong informant, people literally apply mustard oil to their lips while eating a jackfruit because it helps to prevent the white sticky residue from adhering to one's lips. The point of the proverb is that oil was applied while the fruit was still on the tree, when in fact, to be effective, the oil must be applied after eating the fruit. Applying the oil too soon is hasty since the person may never actually get to eat it. A parallel proverb in English is:

Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

Another example where audience is important is the following:

<i>huâr</i>	<i>kopal-ni</i>	<i>condon</i>	<i>phota</i>
hog	forehead-in	sandalwood.paste	bindi
n	n-post	n	n

A religious mark on a pig's forehead.

If a mixed audience were to see a picture of a pig with a red mark on its forehead, the Hindus in the audience would laugh, but Westerners unfamiliar with Hindu culture would be perplexed. An American audience is not familiar with sandalwood or a bindi, so the meaning would be lost with a literal translation. Likewise, Westerners seeing a cow or elephant with a red religious mark would be surprised, while Hindus would think it normal. Some animals are considered holy in Hindu culture while others are not. This is not an assumption shared by most Westerners who view no animals as holy. This proverb is usually used when someone is thought to be hypocritical. A translation that captures a similar idea in English would be:

A wolf in sheep's clothing.

Literary Features

Poetry is difficult to translate because there is a higher value on meter, rhyme, alliteration, and other such literary features. Sometimes the literal meaning is not as important as these literary features. Take the following example:

<i>taoka</i>	<i>di-le</i>	<i>poka</i>	<i>por-e</i>
flick	give-immediate.pst	insect	fall-habitual
n	v-tns	n	vi-tns

If you flick, an insect falls.

The meter and rhyme of this proverb are as important as the meaning itself. Rather than translate *poka* literally as insect, why not use metonymy? For example, look at the following translation:

With only a flick, you kill the tick.

Here tick is substituted for insect. Technically, a tick is not an insect, but rather a small animal that infests dogs, sheep, goats, etc. It is more specific than *poka*, but retains the rhyme of the original. The aesthetic value of poetry supercedes the necessity of a literal rendering. Another rhyming translation that retains the literal meaning of *poka*, but substitutes *taoka* with something unrelated is as follows:

Give it a rest: flick the pest.

Even this example, while missing the idea of killing the insect, is more enjoyable than a mere literal rendering. Again, aesthetic value plays at least as important a role as literal meaning in the translation.

Another example of aesthetic translation is the following:

<i>kha-ba</i>	<i>jani-le,</i>	<i>câlâ-i</i>	<i>cirâ;</i>
eat-inf	know-if	rice-emphasis	flat.rice
v-mood	v-cond	n-PTCL	n
<i>buh-i-ba</i>	<i>jani-le,</i>	<i>mati-ra-i</i>	<i>pirâ.</i>
sit-impf-inf	know-if	floor-DEF-emphasis	stool
v ASP	-mood v-cond	n-ART-PTCL	n

If you know how to eat, even uncooked rice is edible;
If you know how to sit, even the ground can be a stool.

Note how the words *cirâ* ‘rice’ and *pirâ* ‘stool’ rhyme in Hajong. An English translation that misses the rhyme would not be satisfactory. Some liberties may be taken to retain the rhyme:

If you know how to eat, even rice grains taste fair.
If you know how to sit, even the floor is a chair.

Technically, a *pirâ* is not a chair. A *pirâ* is a very low stool which rests on two supports. However, the main idea of the proverb still comes across: someone with poise and composure can make the best of any situation.

Finally, we return once again to our bamboo proverb. Notice the alliteration used in this proverb with the consonant “b.”

Bibak bangosla tengol nahoi.
All bamboo cannot be made into tie strips (for fencing).

A translation that retains the literary features will be received more positively. The translation using alliteration with “g” follows:

All that glitters is not gold.

Here, accuracy to the original is sacrificed for the sake of aesthetics. It might be advisable in this case to show both a literal and poetic translation so as not to sacrifice accuracy at the expense of aesthetics. Depending on the audience, either the literal or poetic translation could be put in a footnote.

Conclusion

Translation is a dialogue between two cultures with the translator in the role of negotiator. The more familiar s/he is with both source and target cultures, the more effective the translation. Accuracy, clarity, and aesthetics must all be borne in mind. Cultural gaps may be filled in by adaptation or footnotes, depending on the audience and on the translator’s fidelity to the original author.

References

Ganguli, Kisari Mohan, tr. *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, Book I Adi Parva*, p. xi.
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All Hajong proverbs cited were collected by the Hajong Student Union in 2005, mainly in the Garobadha. A few additional proverbs were provided by the Hajong Sahitya Sabha in 2006. I am especially grateful to Mr. Abonish Hajong, Mr. Abhijit Barman, and Ms. Mamata Hajong for their help in translating these proverbs into English and their insights into the Hajong culture. Special thanks also goes to Mr. Biren Hajong for his kind suggestions for improvements on translating the proverbs. I also wish to acknowledge my wife and her collaboration in this effort. All mistakes in translation are the author's.

Appendix

Hajong Proverbs

মুখুনি ছত পত, ভাঙা দাও পাতি,

ঘৰনি নাই ভাত, লেম লেম ধুতি |

*Mukhuni sotpot, bhanga dao pati,
Ghoroni bhat nâi, lemo lemo dhuti.*

Literal: A blabbermouth wears a stylish dhoti,
but doesn't have anything to eat at home.

Artistic: A blabbermouth with a broken knife
Has no food, but a stylish life.

থাবা জানিলে চৌলীলী চিৰী,

বুহিবী জানিলে মাতিৰীও পিৰী |

*Khaba janile, câlâi cirâ;
Buhibâ janile, matirâi pirâ.*

Literal: If you know how to eat, rice grains are edible;
If you know how to sit, the ground is comfortable.

Artistic: If you know how to eat, rice grains taste fair.
If you know how to sit, the floor is a chair.

দৌৰীলেই পথ ছেছ নহায় |

Dâwrâlei pod ses nahoi.

You can't finish a road by only running / running doesn't mean you've reached your goal.

নেথা কাহল লা আথা বাখাৰ,

ধকনাৰা লা জাক বাখাৰ |

*Netha kaholla atha bakhar,
Dhok nawa mânlâ jak bakhar.*

A bad jackfruit is very gummy,
And an ugly man smells like old beer.

গাছনি কাহল, অতনি তেল |

Gasoni kahol othoni tel.

Literal: While the jackfruit is still on the tree, one is rubbing oil on the lip.

Artistic: Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

বিল দাঙৰালা মাছ নাই,

মুক দাঙৰালা ভাত নাই |

Bil dangrala mas nâi,

Muk dangrala bhat nâi.

A big lake has no fish

And a big mouth has no rice.

Meaning: One who talks much of big lakes with fish, has little fish.

One who talks much of himself has little to eat.

নিজীৰ নামে চিপৰী কাতা,

পৰেলা পালে কীৰছী গালা |

Nijâr name ciprâ kata,

Porela pa-le kâwsâ gala.

A miser projects his neck like a tortoise to get others' treasures.

গুৰু আলছা পানি খাই,

মীন আলছা বেলা চায় |

Guru âlsâ pani khai,

Mân âlsâ bela cai.

A lazy ox drinks water,

A lazy person looks at the sun (waiting for the day to end).

নিজীলী ঘৰনি কুকুলীও বাঘ হয় |

Nijâlâ ghorni kukulâo bagh hoi.

In his own house, a dog is like a tiger.

নৰম মাটি পালে বিলীই হাগে |

Norom mati pale bilâi hage.

Literal: The cat poops on soft floors.

Artistic: Bullies beat up on the weakest.

বাঘ নাথাকা বননি হিয়ীল ৰাজা |

Bagh nathaka bonni hiyâl raja.

When there is no tiger in the forest, the fox is king.

বান্দৰ লা হাতনি খঙতা |

Bandorla hatni khungta.

A trowel is useless in a monkey's hand. A monkey doesn't know how to use a trowel.

নাছিবী নাপাই চাথাল বেকৰা |

Nasibâ napai cathal bekra.

When you can't dance, you blame the floor for not being even.

জালা বৰাত নাই, বিয়ী ঘৰত ভাত নাই |

Jala borat nâi, Biyâ ghoroto bhat nâi.

An unlucky man won't even get food at a wedding.

নাই ঘৰত খাঙ ভালা, উৰে বেৰাই পাতাছলা |

Nâi ghorot khang bhala, ure berai patasala.

An indigent person cares about food, but not his attire.

থেকাত পুৰলে বাগৰাও ঘাছ খাই |

Thekat purle bagrao ghas khai.

If in need, even a tiger can eat grass.

Meaning: Necessity knows no law.

তাৰকা দিলে পকা পৰে |

Taoka dile, poka por-e.

With only a flick, you kill the tick. Give it a rest: kill the pest.

উলতালে দাও পালতালে কাছি |

Ultâle daô paltale kasi.

If upside down, a knife; If rightside up, a sickle.

Meaning: Life is both both/and and either/or.

পানি তললা কাতা জঙ নাদেখে |

Pani tolla kata jong na dekhe.

An underwater thorn is invisible.

Meaning: Watch out for hidden enemies.

কালদাতৰা কৰে, ভক দাতৰা খায় |

Kaldata kore, bhok datra khai.

The canine teeth do the hard work, and the molars eat.

Meaning: Someone is working, and another is eating.

পেত ফুলাই মুৰি, ঘৰ ভাঙায় বুড়ী |

Pet phulâi muri, ghor bhangai buri.

Literal: Crispy rice isn't good for the stomach and an old woman isn't good for a home (causes quarrels).

Artistic: Crispy rice isn't good for the belly, and an old woman in the home is smelly.

গৱাল বাখনাই ঘেউ, মাও বাখনাই বেও |

Gowal bakhnai gheô, mao bakhnai jhiu.

A milkman praises his butter, and a mother praises her daughter.

লাঙ কুৰিলেহে জানে কত জালা,

মাওৰাহে জানে পেতলা মায়া |

Lang kurilehe jane koto jala;

Maorahe jane petla koto maya.

If you commit adultery, you will know pain.

If you are a mother, you will know compassion.

বাখাৰ মাছ দিখিলে বগা কানা হয় |

Bakhar mas dikhile boga kana hoi.

Many a fish makes a crane blind (doesn't know which one to eat).

Meaning: Abundance makes a man blind.

একগৰা ঝিলি দিয়োঁছাই বেৰা নহায় |

Ekra jhili diyâsâi bera nahoi.

One strip of bamboo doesn't make a fence.

মেলমেলা গাঁই, বল বাজিবো চাই |

Melmela gâi bol bajibâ cai.

A female who speaks softly wants a big response.

গিৰুছিত মন নাই,

পাৰাপুৰ্ছিলা ঘুম নাই |

Girustilâ mon nâi,

Parapursilâ ghum nâi.

The neighbors get more excited than the family.

হুৱীৰ কপালনি চনদন ফতা |

Huâr kopalni condon phota.

A sacred sandalwood mark on a pig's forehead.

Artistic: A wolf in sheep's clothing.
Meaning: Someone is being hypocritical.

খৈৰাও ফুতি তাও বমা নহায় |

Khoiráo phuti tao buma nahoi.

Puffed rice cracks, but it isn't a cracker. Puffed rice is explosive, but it is not a bomb.

আকাছী মুৰিছলা ঝালা বিছি |

Ákâsi murislâ jhala bisi.

Don't judge a chili by its size. Even small chilis can bite.

জেই মুলাৰা বাৰেবো

বেকং পাতাতে থাৰ পাই |

Jei mulârâ barebô

Bekong patate thar pai.

It only takes two leaves to judge the quality of a raddish.

বিবাক বাঙচলা তেঙল নহায় |

Bibak bangosla tengol nahoi.

All bamboo cannot be made into tie strips (for fencing).

Artistic: All that glitters is not gold.

এগৰা হাত দিয়া তাপলি নাৰাজে |

Ekra hat dia tapli nabaje.

You can't clap with only one hand.

কানা গুৰু জুদা বাথান |

Kana guru judâ bathan.

A blind ox divides the farm.

Artistic: A bad apple spoils the bunch.