

The Choice of Words in Translation: A Selective Study of English and Tamil Equivalent Proverbs

Irene Lydia C & E. S. Latha

Abstract

Translation and the use of words have always gone hand in hand. The usage of words creates a significant impact in any translation be it source language or the target language. Any word that is used in translation is the choice of the translator. This paper proposes to study the choice of words used by the translator and the factors impacting the translator to negotiate in it. In a field like translation studies, the context becomes a vital component in determining the accuracy of the translated text. Each word plays a role in a sentence. The role of each word determines the context that is conveyed. When a translation takes place the role of each word matters as much as the context. Hence it is necessary to look into each word and its role in the sentence. However this necessity is often hindered because of the influence of other aspects like culture, social and political. Here is where the need for negotiation arrives for the translator. The paper aims to make a comparative study of Tamil and English equivalent proverbs to show how the choice of words differs and its impact in the overall context. This study also proposes to show that translation can enhance the beauty of the original text using non-equivalent words yet without altering the meaning and the context.

Keywords: Choice of words; Equivalent; Negotiation; Translation.

Translation was rarely considered as a separate work of art or a creative art in the field of literature, though in recent years, it has been gaining equal amount of popularity and criticism for its role in various areas. Translation is no longer accepted in its simplest form of definition as "rendering from one language to another". Initially the word translation came from the latin word *translatio* meaning "to bring across or to carry over".

This was taken as bringing or carrying the meaning from one language to another. Hence translation began showing up as a way of communication from one language to another with importance given to the meaning conveyed. Over the years this has been changed due to various reasons. Interference of factors relating to social, cultural and political made translation evolve into a separate study called translation studies.

This paper proposes to study the choice of words in translation and its impact in framing the overall context of the translated text. Since the paper aims to focus on 'words', we ought to look into some practices and theories proposed by translation theorists pertaining to this aspect. Initially the translation theorists favored only word for word and sense for sense translations.

The word for word translation also known as 'metaphrase' in translation studies was proposed as a theory by one of the translation theorists, John Dryden in 1680 in his preface to *Ovid's Epistles*. This type of translation is where one word is translated into another language as a separate word without taking into consideration its role in the sentence. This translation is also done line by line without considering the role of that line in a paragraph. It focuses mainly on semantic and syntactic structures. This type of translation cannot be wholly reliable as the meaning of any particular word or a line alone might differ in its meaning when it is placed in a sentence or a paragraph. For example, in English, there are certain cases where the parts of speech play an important role in determining the meaning of the word. The word 'watch' plays a different role as a word alone and in a sentence. 'Watch' as a verb means to look or to observe and as a noun it means a timepiece tied around our hands. According to its part of speech, the word differs in its meaning.

In word for word translation, the translator must look for its role in the sentence instead of the word alone. Also, if we consider a word and look into the dictionary for its meaning, we may find two or more synonyms for it. Choosing the word that fits in a particular context matters, hence metaphrase might not be accurate in all cases and it may not fulfill the actual purpose of translation. The sense for sense translation, known as paraphrase is again used by Dryden. This type of translation opposes the metaphrase and focuses mainly on the meaning conveyed.

The British translation theorist, Peter Newmark classifies translation as semantic and communicative. While semantic translation focuses on the meaning of the words, it cannot be considered wholly as a faithful trans-

lation since it relates more to syntactic structures of the source language. This type of translation relates to the original more than the target language or the target audience. The communicative translation focuses on the effect it produces on the target language readers. It adapts itself to the requirement of the target language and is ready to make the necessary changes for effective communication of the context. Here the purpose of translation is to make sure that the translation produces the same effect on the readers as it did in the original source language text thereby allowing negotiation. Thus this type of translation is used more in the field of literature compared to other fields which require literal translation.

There are some negotiations that the translators have to make in order to achieve a reliable translation. However the extent of negotiation required for any particular text is determined by the translators or certain external factors. Also, to what extent the negotiation is useful and helpful in translation is another determinant. Negotiation for the purpose of accuracy in translation is needed. Translation being negotiated for valid purposes like understanding or for accuracy can be reliable but being done for other purposes cannot be accurate. There are chances for the translation to be misinterpreted by the target audience.

Certain external factors like colonialism, power and culture have an influence in the translation thereby altering and negotiating the target text according to the versions that suits the situation. Such instances have been and are happening in every field that requires translation. Some familiar encounters like these happen every day around us. Though it might not be very significant, if we look closer, we can find such influence and negotiation happening in translation. The influence can be seen clearly in social media and in mass media communication. Certain contexts which are politically sensitive to any particular state or country maybe forbidden or rather censored by the government for various reasons. Translators are to follow this censorship; hence they are pressurized to negotiate in their translation. Translators are also expected to follow certain linguistic aspects in order to maintain the state or country's identity and preserve its language. This happens both ways where translator should maintain the political ethics of both the source language and the target language. Hence these negotiations are needed in translation practice.

However, there are also certain political negotiations that are done because of the power structure. For example, we see different news channels covering the same news in various versions. This mostly depends on the owner of the channel and on the political party that supports it. If

the language of the news channel is Tamil, and there is a political leader talking in any language other than Tamil, the channel will translate his/her speech to Tamil and telecast it simultaneously. Though this is more like an interpretation rather than a translation, we find different news channels telecasting the same speech in different versions in Tamil. The overall meaning might be the same but the choice of words used might differ according to different contexts, thereby paving the way for different interpretations by the viewers.

In our current global situation, the need for translation has become a must. Technology has developed so much that any translation for any caption or text is just a click away. Absolutely anything that is in spoken or written form can be translated within seconds, though the accuracy can still be debated. Yet when it comes to translation of written literary texts, there are a lot of other aspects involved that it cannot be done entirely only with the help of technology. Each word that is used by the translator becomes significant in his/her translation pertaining to its context. However this paper aims to deal with one of the aspects that does not hinder in conveying the meaning or context in translation. The choice of words in translating a text from its source language to the target language matter when it comes to certain aspects as followed in translation studies.

The literary critic I.A. Richards has proposed that the meaning of a text is a combination sense, feeling, tone and intention. This meaning depends solely on the author of the text. However, in translation, if the meaning is conveyed in proper context and it is received by the target audience as the original was received by the source language audience, the translation has done its job. This paper tries to showcase that sometimes the words that are used in translation may not be the equivalent word for the source language, but the translator might have used it for aesthetic purposes. Translation can also be a creative art form that enhances the beauty of the original text. The best suitable study for this would be idioms, phrases and proverbs that are translated from one language to another that aren't equivalent in words but similar in meaning and context. The paper will be dealing with a few well known proverbs in Tamil and its English equivalent or vice versa. These proverbs are selected randomly and are in use for many decades. The Tamil proverbs are transliterated for better understanding.

The proverbs that are mentioned below are similar in equivalent words and in context in both English and Tamil:

Tamil: Kuraikira Naai kadikaathu (குரக்கிற நாய் கடிக்காது)

English: Barking dogs seldom bite

Tamil: Minnuvathellam Ponnalla (மின்னுவதெல்லாம்பொன்னல்ல)

English: All that glitters is not gold

English: Prevention is better than cure

Tamil: Varummun kaapathe siranthathu (வரும்முன் காப்பதே சிறந்தது.)

These kinds of proverbs are very easy to understand in any given situation in the source language and the target language. Since these proverbs are in use for ages, we cannot be sure to know which language had this proverb first and which was translated later on. Hence we are considering it to be equivalents in context from both languages.

We find equivalent proverbs in any two given languages rather than literal translation. Below we find a few of such proverbs in Tamil and English that are same in context but they are not in equivalent words in Tamil and English.

Tamil: Oorodu othu vaazhu (ஊரடோடும் ஒத்து வாழ்.)

English: Do in Rome as Romans do.

This Tamil proverb literally translates to “live along with your place” whereas the equivalent proverb to it in English specifies a particular place ‘Rome’ and asks us to do stuff like the ‘Romans’ when we are in Rome. Both tend to convey the meaning as, wherever you are, you have to live according to the place.

Tamil: Ullathai ullavaaru sol (உள்ளதை உள்ளவாறு சொல்.)

English: Call a spade a spade

This is another proverb that is similar to the previous one. The Tamil proverb translates as, “say things as they are” and the English equivalent proverb again specifies a particular thing called ‘spade’. It is more like an explanation with the help of an example.

English: As you sow, So you reap

Tamil: Vinai vidhaithavan vinai arupaan, thinai vidhaithavan thinai arupaan. (வினை விதைத்தவன் வினை அறுப்பான், தினை விதை த்தவன் தினை அறுப்பான்)

This proverb again does the same thing as the previous one. However in this proverb, the context in the English equivalent is general and it is more like two examples of the context in the Tamil equivalent.

English: Every Jack has his Jill

Tamil: Raamanuku yetra seethai (ராமனுக்கு ஏற்ற சீதை)

The above mentioned proverb is completely in different words but still convey the same meaning. This proverb has a cultural aspect attached to it. The meaning conveyed in both equivalent proverbs is that one person complements the other person. The English proverb refers to Jack and Jill from the nursery rhyme and the Tamil proverb refers to Ram and Sita from the great Indian epic Ramayana. Here literal translation cannot take place because of the cultural context and background, hence the choice of words is different yet the meaning remains the same.

The below mentioned proverbs are similar in context but their equivalent proverbs convey the same meaning in a contrary manner.

Tamil: Nirai kudam neer thalumbaathu (நிறைகூடம் நீர் தளும்பாது)

English: Empty vessels make more noise

The Tamil proverb conveys that a vessel that is full (with water) will not be shaken. Considering the contrary meaning of this proverb, The English equivalent conveys that empty vessels (not full) will shake and thereby create noise. Though this is the literal meaning of the proverb, its metaphorical meaning is that, the ones filled with knowledge will not be easily shaken, that is, they will keep calm and will be of few words; and the ones with less or no knowledge keep on talking though he/she has no proper information to be shared. The former is conveyed in the tamil proverb and latter is conveyed through the English equivalent proverb

Tamil: Noiattra vaazhve kuraivattru selvam (நோயற்ற வாழ்வே கூறவைற்ற செல்வம்.)

English: Health is wealth

This is another similar proverb that is almost opposite in the words used but conveys the same meaning in Tamil and English. The English proverb is direct and conveys that one's health is actually the true wealth that he/she possesses. The Tamil equivalent proverb conveys the same in negative words. It conveys that the one without any disease is the one who does not lack any wealth. Though the context is the same in both equivalent proverbs, the choice of words has differed.

In some Tamil proverbs, animals are used as examples to explain the metaphorical meaning. However, the English equivalent does not make use of the same animals to convey the meaning. Animals associated with the Tamil proverbs may or may not be culture specific, but there might possibly be a background story related to the proverb. Whatever might be the case, again the meaning remains the same. The choice of words is different in English and Tamil proverbs. Below are some proverbs that have used different species of animals in their equivalents to convey the same meaning.

English: Spare the rod and spoil the child

Tamil: Adiyaatha maadu paniyathu (அடியாத மாடு பணியாது)

This English proverb talks about a child that would need a rod to discipline him/her. If the rod of discipline is not used, the child would be spoilt is the meaning conveyed. The Tamil equivalent proverb is conveying the same meaning through a cow that is disciplined by a beating. Both the proverbs suggest that an external physical force is required for discipline be it a child or an animal.

English: A burnt child dreads the fire

Tamil: Sudu kanda poonai adupadi varathu (சூட்டு கண்ட பூனை அடும்படி வராது)

This proverb is very similar to the previous one, where the English proverb talks about a child that would fear the fire if it had experienced a burn before and its Tamil equivalent conveys the same meaning with a cat. The cat that has experienced a burn before will not come near the cooking area is the literal meaning of the Tamil proverb. This proverb conveys the same meaning that once you experience a hurt because of something; you would refrain from doing it or stay away from it. These kinds of proverbs have different equivalents compared to the previous types. Again the choice of words here has differed but it has not created any disturbance in

the meaning of the equivalent proverbs.

English: Casting pearls before swine

Tamil: Kurangu kaiyil poo maalai (குரங்கு கையில் பூ மாலை)

This proverb is different from the above mentioned ones since the English and the Tamil proverbs talk about animals but of different species. The context behind this proverb is that one will be of little or no value if they are not at the right place or rather, their value would be destroyed if they are in a wrong place. The English proverb conveys this idea with pearls thrown to pigs, which would only stamp and destroy them. The Tamil equivalent says a flower garland is handed over to a monkey only to be torn apart and destroyed, which metaphorically means that if one cannot know the value of something, he/she cannot appreciate it.

All the above mentioned proverbs are similar in meaning but the choice of words has differed in various aspects as discussed. Hence this paper has tried to show that the choice of words can be of less significance in translation if the context or meaning remains the same. The reason translators can choose to negotiate in the choice of words might be because of aspects like cultural and linguistic variations. Just as accuracy and fidelity are important in translation, the appropriate context conveyed is also necessary. For these reasons, the translator may give importance to the target audience reader's experience and also consider the aesthetic and poetic nature of the text taken up for translation.

This paper has taken up one of the most problematic areas in translation, the proverbs and sayings and has explored the idea of usage of 'words' in the aspect of translator's choice. Hence as long as the translated text communicates and resonates the idea and context of the original text, certain variations in the choice of words are acceptable. This variation in words will be helpful in exploring the beauty of translation and how much translation can enhance the beauty of an original text in the target language.

Works Cited:

Aiyangar, Ramaswami. *Parallel Proverbs in Tamil and English*. The Indian Printers' Agency Company, 180-181, Broadway, 1905.

Das, Bijay Kumar. *A Handbook of Translation Studies*. Third revised edition,

Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2013.

Dorn, Louis. "APPROACHES TO TRANSLATION (Language Teaching Methodology Series). Peter Newmark. Pergamon Press, 1981." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, vol. 7, no. 1, Feb. 1985.

Newmark, Peter. *Approaches to Translation*. Pergamon Press, 1981.

Reynolds, Matthew. "Translation: A Very Short Introduction." *Oxford University Press eBooks*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ac-trade/9780198712114.001.0001>.

Richards, I.A., *On Translation*. Harvard University Press, 1959.