

Editing My Translation: My Struggle for a Perfect Translation!

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"There is always room for improvement" is a common precept among the elite.

Does that mean there is no such thing as a "perfect translation"? That may be true. But, in reality, we have to stop somewhere and say, "I am done. This is my best version." I arrived at that juncture regarding my translation of my novel, *Chataka Birds, A Story of Immigrant Experience*, and posted it on my website, thulika.net, recently.

That translation took me 11 months to finish. It is only 144 pages; should have finished it in 3 to 4 months. But, for a few months now, I was going through my old translations and found they could use editing. In the past one year, I became better aware of the little differences in sentence construction in English. My recent translation reflects those nitty-gritty details. So, I thought it would be a good idea to share my experiences here. You may know some of them. However, in view of some of the translations I had received, I thought I should mention them again.

Translating stories for readers from other states within India is different from translating for readers who are not knowledgeable of our traditions, customs, and intrinsic cultural values. In the latter case, translators should be aware of how readers from other cultures would receive the translation. They may not consider our jokes as jokes because of the cultural differences. What is normal for us may sound abnormal to them; or vice versa.

Let us start with changes in the content.

Possible changes needed/useful

In my novel, I made some changes in conversations, both in the conversations among Indians, and in the conversations between Americans and Indians. In the conversations among Indians, I diluted some lines that might sound awkward for those who do not know our culture. A story should not be treated as a sociology class. However, giving some information minimally does not hurt. One example is the use of relational terminology. I did not go into an elaborate description of the principles of how one addresses the other in our culture, but mentioned it is common in our culture to use the relational terminology to address others as a way of respect and in interaction with others. In America, people do not use terms like uncle and aunt the way we do; not even the words like brother and sister, except in close-knit groups and under certain circumstances. Translators should check if they are using the words in the correct context.

I like proverbs. I have used them in the Telugu version. Some of them are not really add to the content. So, I deleted them in the translation. In the past, I had given the Telugu proverb in footnotes, as some English-speaking Telugu readers asked for them. In a short story it was alright, but in a novel I found they increase the

number of footnotes. So, I dropped that idea. My point is, while it is nice to cater to the needs of the students of English medium schools, it is also important to design the text to suit the primary target audience's interests.

Even more intriguing are the relational terms like చిన్నన్నయ్య, మామయ్య, అత్తయ్య, తోడికోడలు etc.; they are hard to translate. చిన్నన్నయ్య would be younger older brother! Instead, I used the Telugu terms as proper nouns, with a footnote the first time it occurred in the story. So also, మేనరికం is a term I had to struggle with. Not only because the word has no equivalent in English, but also because the practice of the marriage between cross-cousins is not acceptable in the western world.

Culture-specific words like *mangalasutram* and *pellichupulu* needed some attention. I searched on the Internet to see if there are words in English already in use, before I coined my own terms. I found out that thali for mangalasutram is in use in English texts. Until now, I thought thali meant only a plate. For pellichupulu, I did not find a word in English. So, I used the same term, and gave a brief explanation in a footnote.

Sometimes, I put the explanation in brackets in the text itself. e.g. Pullareddy Sweets (A famous store in Hyderabad). That way, the need to go back and forth between the text and the notes would be less. My point is do not go overboard with footnotes. Too many footnotes would be frustrating; they ruin the joy of reading a good story.

Another major cultural difference is in the perception of privacy. Historically, privacy is not a moral or ethical value in our country. It may have originated from conditions such as living two or three generations under one roof. Population is a major contributory factor in developing cultural norms. In recent times, the western educated people are taking privacy seriously. However, the age-old practice kicks in even among the educated and so-called "cultured" groups. I tried to point out this anomaly in my novel. But, I also tried to water it down by using one character to provide an explanation. You are welcome to tell me whether I succeeded or not in my attempt.

Basically, I focused on giving more information on topics which non-native readers are not familiar with and/or have questions about. That includes customs, traditions, viewpoints, and misconceptions. I tried to illustrate the views or misconceptions which exist in both America and India without prejudice. Sorting out those notions and presenting them in a logical manner took plenty of my energy.

I checked on the Internet for grammar, sentence construction and vocabulary every step of the way. This is something I had not done before, and found it paid off richly. Also, another reason it took so long to finish it.

2. Editing

Having a good command of diction is only a first step. A good understanding of both cultures is important. One Telugu reader commented it was not proper for

Geetha to receive suitcases from a stranger. In my opinion, that is a false sense of morality, and hypocritical to some extent. I would not take such comments seriously.

The translator is responsible for the language in the translation. Do not tell the magazine editor they may make changes as they please, and that you would not mind. It is not fair to the original author either.

It is not the editor's job to correct or make changes. Also, every translator has their own vocabulary. Only the translator knows what he/she intends to interpret the author's view by using a suitable word or phrase. This is particularly true of linguistic variations and sentence construction. Editor's understanding of the story, if he reads, may be different from yours. Thus, editor's attempt to change can mess up the entire translation.

3. Grammar and spell check.

I must admit that my translations are not perfect, despite my long record of translating work. In my early translation adventure, I used to ask my American friends for their advice. I found something interesting in the process. What one reader considered a mistake was acceptable to another. Thus, I realized that there are always going to be variations because of individual reader's perception and education; that I might not get a perfect version ever.

I was not aware at the time, but now I found some free software on the Internet for checking spellings and grammar. They are not perfect, but were helpful in double checking my text. Check thesaurus also helped a lot. Everybody has his or her own vocabulary. That might not be enough. Each word has a slightly different connotation. I check thesaurus regularly for the word, which suits best in a given context. It never hurts to double-check if you are using the correct word in the context.

Finally, as the editor of my website, thulika.net, I would like to address a few issues from the editor's perspective.

1. I mentioned it earlier. It is not proper to tell the editor they can change the text as they please, and that you have no objection. Here is why:

a) The editor may not have read the original in Telugu. Even if he did, his understanding of the story may not be the same as yours. That requires the editor to compare the original to your translation, and rehash the translation as needed. That is as good as doing the translation himself.

b) Every person has his own vocabulary. The words he uses may not be in your vocabulary (personal dictionary), and that could lead to misinterpretation of the original. That goes for the colloquialisms, too.

c) It simply is not the editor's job. You have undertaken the translation; it is your job to prepare a good translation to submit.

2. Language. Be consistent. Formal, informal, scholastic, colloquial, urban - whatever you choose, be consistent. Using colloquialisms, acronyms, abbreviations, buzzwords, like sis or bro, may not work well in a translation. We are not Americans and no point in pretending to be.

4. Footnotes and formatting.

I never thought I would have to say this, but, after seeing some submissions from highly educated writers, some even with doctoral degrees, fumble on footnotes and formatting, I thought I would mention it.

There is a difference between notes and footnotes. Notes would work when the translation is 3 or 4 pages long. For a longer translation, footnotes is a better choice. Consider it from the standpoint of a reader having to scroll back and forth. If you are providing notes, put the numbers in brackets following the word for which the note is meant.

Formatting is important, irrespective of who your audience is.

a) Paragraph breaks. Insert a space between paragraphs. In conversations, each dialogue is a paragraph.

b) Double-check where two words are hyphenated and where two words become another word independently. For example, copyright is one word, not two words. Whiteman could be a proper name, but a person of the white race is a white man, two words.

c) Capital letters, Italics, and Bold have different connotations. Do not use them as you please. Check on the Internet, if you are not sure. Using italics for more than 2 or 3 sentences is **not** a good practice.

Last, read a few English short stories, paying close attention **only to the formatting**. Trust me, it improves your translation immensely.

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