



# “Translatable” Words for “Untranslatable” Indigenous Essence

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Date of Submission: 24-08-2021

Date of Acceptance: 07-09-2021

## I. INTRODUCTION

World literature is permeated with translations, which emerged in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, when a Roman dramatist, Terence, had meticulously translated Corinthian comedies into the Roman language. Both ‘writing’ and ‘translation’, act in a ‘dialectical correlative’ manner, where the existence of the later solely depends on the ‘birth’ of the former. According to archaeologists, writing first evolved in ancient Sumeria, circa 3200 BCE.

Two earliest literary translations are *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in 2100 BC and *The Bible* by St. Jerome. These translations initiated an alter formation of a separate and independent corpus, frequently branded as ‘translated literature’ – which is an all-encompassing body of works. Until several centuries later, the first documented English translation is the *Hebrew Bible* by William Tyndale, mostly known as *The Tyndale Bible*.

In the recent past, translation has become even more frequent and an indispensable field of study, especially after the unprecedented growth of colonization and hegemonic empiricism., where the literature of minor languages are translated into politically influential languages. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into 57 languages, Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* into 56 languages, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* into 59 languages, Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* into 70 languages, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* into 50 languages, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* into 200 languages, Vyasa’s *Bhagavad Gita* into 80 languages, Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* into 73 languages, are few of the numerous books translated into other languages.

A person relishes most flavor from his native language. The unadulterated essence remains embedded in an indigenous language, which is unavailable in any other language of the world. In the process of making a book globally accessible, the translators are unable to provide exact and

appropriate substitutes for the words, not all words are available in all the other languages.

With the accelerated increase in colonization, in the past few centuries, England being a dominant force of despotism and empiricism, has ‘borrowed’ several words from other languages to English. English is the melting pot, a veritable ‘bricolage’ of numerous foreign words, which gradually appeared in English dictionaries over centuries.

During the Norman Conquest, in 11<sup>th</sup> century, France occupied England. In that prolonged period of acquisition, France had left profound influence over English language. More than seven thousand French origin words are present in English today like, ‘ballad’, ‘balloon’, ‘tableau’, ‘table’, ‘motif’, ‘overture’, ‘denouement’, ‘renaissance’, are few among the many.

In the same vein, during two hundred years of British annexation of India, several words emerged in English language because of an extraordinarily long duration of contact between English and other indigenous languages. The Britishers gradually started to learn the regional languages in order to successfully run the government and to interact with the local people who were devoid of elementary education and completely ignorant of English. In this long period of interaction, more than one thousand words of Indian origin across all the various indigenous languages are imbued into English. To mention a few are, ‘punch’, ‘jungle’, ‘loot’, ‘bungalow’, ‘avatar’, ‘yoga’, ‘pyjamas’, ‘shampoo’ and so on.

French along with Latin cover 45% of English language and 58% including all the other languages. Even if we are able to translate a word, we miserably fail to articulate its complex web of meaning and structure. No translation is perfect and appropriate, but are semblances lacking in other languages. For instance, ‘amour’, is regarded as the French counterpart of English ‘love’, but it is often doubted as “exact match”. Likewise, ‘petite’ is



considered the French counterpart of English 'small' or 'diminutive', but it is still debatable regarding its authenticity and exactness.

Authors over centuries have endeavored hard for their works to become worldwide popular and famous, and hence, in order to 'fit in', they have deviated from their mother tongue to a more acceptable and embracing form of language. NgugiWaThiong'o, in his seminal and groundbreaking work, *Decolonizing the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature*, announced his "farewell to English" and urged his contemporary African writers to adopt one's own indigenous language and to refute the hegemonic languages, such as French and English. In this book, Ngugi attempted to disrupt the comprehensive understanding of their language and compelled the westerners to either translate it into English or to learn the author's Gikuyu language for extensive understanding of the meaning.

Many a times, translation has been employed as a "political weapon" to twist and disfigure the contents of the text, by removing or reducing the hideous side of a monolithic government and by spotlighting their philanthropic activities in order to make it more appropriate for presentation. Most of the pre-classical texts that have survived, including Egyptian papyri and the stone tablets found in the Middle East, showed that translation was primarily used for religious and political purposes. The most glaring of these is Rosetta Stone, a political document in three languages; Ancient Egyptian, Egyptian demonic script and Ancient Greek, were used to establish the cult of King Ptolemy V.

Another important example of political agendas on translation was the Spanish version of Hugh Thomas' *The Spanish Civil War*. Often considered the best delineation of this harrowing and traumatic historic event, later the text was translated by Editions Ruedolberico, which was completely unacceptable to Franco's Spain. SanzGallego said that the later translation had toned down the atrocities committed by the Republican side and transplanted several of the provoking words to make the text more sober and pleasant. If the unaltered and unedited version got published, it could infuriate the local mass, which in turn would give rise to revolt and internal strife and simultaneously would malign their government's name. In order to safeguard their untainted image and to suppress the voice of agony and grievance, they had to revamp the whole work to publish it.

Literary translation is challenging and problematic at times. Not all idioms are available in all languages of the world. For instance, in English,

'let the cat out of the bag', which means 'to give away a secret', but a definite literal translation of this idiom in any other language will not be accurate and appropriate and it will rather sound more of a feline escape from the bag. In the same fashion, the idiom 'to wear one's heart on one's sleeve' in English means 'to overtly express one's feelings or emotions', but an apparent translation of this in some other language might sound like the literal meaning of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. The exact subtly of meaning is not adequately expressed and hence, in most cases, chances of misconception and misjudgment are manifold.

Semantic change of words occur over a long period of time, primarily because of translation. Semantic changes happen due to the insurgent social milieu and dismantling political dynamics of a particular period. Both 'euphemism' (sweet-sounding and inoffensive words) and 'dysphemism' (offensive and pejorative words) can have subtle change of meaning or there can be addition of new meanings to the existing vocabulary. For example, the term 'awful', once used as 'full of awe', but now there is complete reversal of meaning. Now it is primarily used in a derogatory and degrading fashion. Similarly, the word, 'spinster', which once meant a legal occupation of a woman who spun, but gradually the connotation has completely revamped and it means 'unmarried woman'. In the same vein, the term 'guy', originally meant the infamous person 'Guy Fawkes', who was an integral part of a failed attempt to blow up the Parliament, and the word has a tinge of devious repulsion. But over time, 'guy' means any individual in general.

There is an unprecedented shift from the original, authentic meaning of a word to a more acceptable contemporary connotation. With evolution, the actual essence and significance of the meaning, will lose its importance and the historical prominence attached to it. Literary translations are misrepresentations of ideas, concepts and thoughts, which had once sprouted because of its concurrent social ambience and political upheaval.

Translations are misrepresentations and duplicitous caricature of authentic and original texts, which one translated loses its essence and flavor which can only be relished in its indigenous languages in which it is written. Translations are able to convey the meaning of the text, but pathetically fail to express the innuendos and intricacies of word meanings and syntactic structure. Though it helps the readers to comprehend the crux of the author's viewpoint, but it still misses out deliberate silences and purposeful compilation of words, which elevates a text one step higher.