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Problems in Re-representation of *Dunai* - A Poumai Naga Folktale

Abstract

This article attempts to show the problem areas of translation when Poumai folktales get translated from vernacular to English language. Identifying of these problems becomes important to understand the cultural nuances implicit in the folktales. This will help the readers, the importance of recognizing cultural uniqueness and develop a sense of appreciation towards unfamiliar cultures. In a country like India, translation becomes necessary because of its multicultural and multilingual in nature. The diverse languages and cultures can be linked in various ways and one of the most effective ways is translation, and the very act translating Poumai folktales into English can be called translation/ re-representation.

Looking into some of the theoretical contours of translation will be an important part of this article as it is important to create a holistic perspective to understand different layers of meaning embedded in the folktales, especially the cultural package that comes with oral narratives and need to faithfully translate/re-represent the cultural grain from one language to another. It would also discuss various problems of translation like loss of meaning, cultural in-equivalence, and loss of context in translation. In the post-colonial academic discussion locating the context becomes necessary and, therefore, even in this case, locating the context of the story becomes necessary to see how distinctively folktales sketch the mental and cultural landscape of the Poumai community.

In conclusion, it would be important to note that translation is not always about loss, but also about gain, and it is this larger gain, that forces the act of translation to happen. The very act of translating Poumai folktales ensures that it is conserved for posterity including a larger readership. Translation in the present global world provides a common platform for languages and cultures to interact though one cannot negate the problem, theoretical or practical, which are inherent in the process.

Keywords: Poumai folktale, Re-representation, Translation, Source language, Target language, Untranslatability, Loss in translation, Sense to sense translation.

Introduction

The notion of one culture, one language and one identity seems to be somewhat far-fetched and distant possibility for a country like India because of its multicultural and multilingual nature. But the diverse languages and cultures can be linked in various ways and one of the most effective ways is translation. Translation is a process through which a common platform is created wherein different knowledge can be shared for various purposes and the very act of translating Poumai folktales into English can be called translation/re-representation. This article intends to explore the problem areas of translation when oral narratives get translated from vernacular to English language. In this case, it is the Poumai language into English language; Poumai Naga tribe inhabits the northeastern part of India, particularly in Senapati district of Manipur and some in the southeastern part of Nagaland in Phek District. Poumai literature is primarily oral in nature. It is handed down from one generation to another through the word of mouth.

Theoretical Contours of Translation

The need to look into some of the theoretical contours of translation becomes necessary to create a holistic perspective to understand different layers of meaning implicit in the folktales, especially the cultural package that comes with oral narratives and the need to faithfully translate/re-represent the cultural grain from one language to another. Nida pointed out, "The three principles of faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance should be understood not as competitive but as additive factors; first faithful equivalence in meaning, second expressive clarity of form and third, attractive elegance that makes a text pleasurable to read."³ Despite his formulation Nida further adds that there is no one generally accepted theory of translation in the technical sense of a coherent set of general propositions used as a principle to explain a class of phenomena but there are several theories in the broad sense of principles that are helpful in understanding the nature of translating or in establishing criteria for evaluating a principal translated text. However, these principles are stated in terms of how to produce an acceptable translation. The lack of a fully acceptable theory of translation should not come as a surprise, because translating is essentially a complex phenomenon and insights concerning the inter-lingual activity are derived from several disciplines, for example, linguistic, sociolinguistic, psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, socio semiotics, etc.

The most significant issue one faces while translating/re-representing a folktale in written form or into another language is to find a single point of concrete objective of folk literature. Since it is oral in nature, it is dynamic in its form and content that with every utterance a new 'text' is born. This can be explained with Saussure's concept of *langue/parole* dichotomy. Each time a folktale is orally performed/retold by a different individual, it becomes a *parole* intervention in the language and the folktale undergoes changes according to the manifestation of the narrator. In a similar vein, Alessandro Portelli said, "Oral testimony...is never the same twice."⁴

In the post-colonial academic discussion locating the context becomes necessary and, therefore, even in the case, locating the context of the story becomes necessary to see how distinctively folktales sketch the

mental and cultural landscape of the community. According to Rahman and Ansari,⁵ "Translation has also to be viewed as process and product of representation. It involves a metamorphosis of a text/work and it can be defined as a kind of re-representation of an earlier representation in the form of written word."¹ The very act of translating a folktale into English is indeed a re-representation of an earlier representation. Therefore, it would be important to discuss the problems of translation like loss of meaning, cultural in-equivalence and the loss of context in translation.

The Story of Dunai in Brief

The story revolves around the life of a girl called Dunai and the strange things that happened in her life. She grew up as a step-daughter in the family. Dunai lived a very miserable life as her step-mother treated her very cruelly, forcing her to do all the household chores. She had no leisure time to be with her friends. One fine day, she was allowed to go with her friends to collect firewood in the forest, but with a condition that only after she finished her household chores. But her work was too much to be finished on time, thus all of her friends went ahead as they could not wait for her any longer. As she tried to catch up with her friends, she met a strange young man, who offered a helping hand to collect firewood for her. She was left with no choice than to accept the man's offer because it was too late for her to catch up with her friends. Moreover, it was getting late for her to return home. So she decided to accept the offer but the strange man came up with a condition that he would visit her at night, to this proposal she retorted and tried to drop the load and planned to return home empty handed but the strange man somehow managed to assuage her fear by saying that it was only a joke; finally Dunai accepts the offer. Though Dunai accepted the help, she was deeply troubled with the thought that the strange man might visit her. So, she confided her fear to her friends in the *Morung/kheloukizii*ⁱⁱ at night but her friends consoled her not to be afraid and allowed her to sleep in the middle. But, as fate would have it, the man arrived shortly after everyone had slept as they were under the spell of the strange man. The strange man entered calling, "Dunai, where are you, I have come to take you, let us go now."

ⁱDetails can traced from, translation/ Re-representation, p. 14.

ⁱⁱThe *Morung/Kheloukizii*, popularly known as youth dormitory, is one of the most significant social institutions found among the Poumai Nagas. This institution is the fundamental basis of Poumai cultural heritage. The girls have separate *Morung* and are given training in such institution ranging from moral codes to handicrafts and their role in the welfare of the society. Thus, this institution comes to play a very significant role in imparting the cultural values of the Poumais.

Finally, she was taken by the strange man to be his wife. She was taken to the cliff between the rocks where the snake-man lived. She was shocked to discover that though her husband was completely a human being during the day, yet at night he used to transform himself into a huge snake. One day Dunai confided her fear to her parents. Knowing fully aware of the situation, her parents came up with a plan to tackle the situation. Her father asked her to bring her husband to his house with a pretext that he would offer good food and drinks but only to kill him. As instructed, Dunai brought her husband home, so her parents offered him the best food and drinks. Soon

the effect of the drinks acted on him and the snake-man requested them to spread *Zha*ⁱⁱⁱ (a mat like spread) for him to sleep. Unmindful of the surrounding, he transformed himself into a huge snake. Thus, Dunai's father took his knife and killed the snake-man.

The dynamic relation of the author, the reader and the translator is explained in the figure below. In this case, the real author is the community, because the community always has the final say of the meaning and authenticity of the story, though it may be performed by different individuals.



Figure 1. Dynamic relation of Author, Reader and Translator

Loss in Translation

Nida points out in the preface of his book *Context in Translating* that the role of context in understanding and translating text has come to play a very significant role because failure to consider the context of a text is largely responsible for the most serious mistake in

comprehending and reproducing the meaning of a discourse. Therefore, other challenges, which one faces typically in translating a folktale is that they are culturally rooted in the culture of the source language (SL) and specific cultural nuances tend to be compromised and simplified in the process of transmuting the tale to target language.

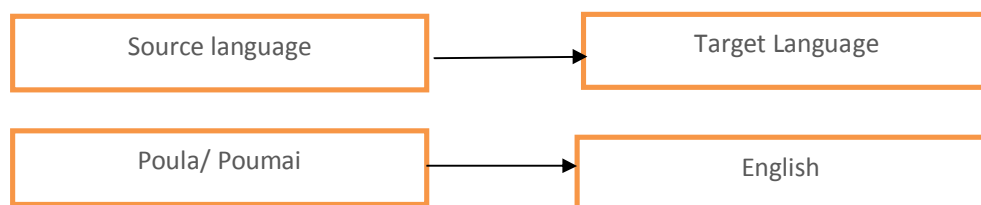


Figure 2. Translation of Source language to Target language

One of the main reasons for the 'loss' of meaning in a translated text is the lack of cultural equivalence in translated language. However, it may also happen that cultural equivalence is available, yet they are unable to portray the exact meaning of it. To illustrate this, the story of Dunai can be cited and particularly the word *Zha* can be a classic example. The word *Zha* is a household material that incorporates cultural nuances of Poumai Nagas. Simply translating the word *Zha* as mat would deplete the whole cultural package as the word mat can be located in any other culture as well. In the context of Poumai, this particular mat-like

spread evokes an independent Poumai culture. It is woven with bamboo in their typical style and its usage is multipurpose in nature; it is used for drying paddy or any agricultural products, and as mentioned in the story, it is used for sleeping as well. In past, every Poumai household would own this particular mat-like spread as it was a necessity. It also gives a glimpse of Poumais' dependence on agricultural products. Locating the contextual meaning becomes necessary so that the cultural grain did not get suppressed in the process of translation. The translated version tried to evade this problem by retaining the original word

ⁱⁱⁱThe word *Zha* is a mat-like spread that incorporates cultural nuances of Poumai Nagas. Simply translating the word *Zha* as mat would deplete the whole cultural package as the word mat can be located in any other culture as well. This particular mat-like spread evokes an independent Poumai culture, made of bamboo woven in their typical style. Its usage is diverse, they are used for drying paddy and agricultural products, as is mentioned in the story; it is used for sleeping as well.

Zha and add footnotes to retain cultural roots of the Poumais. To evaluate its quality, it is necessary to judge how carefully the social-cultural content has been conveyed in an altogether different socio-linguistic space. The reviewer should be aware not only of the source language but also its cultural content to consider seminal problems involving importation into a different domain of language, for, in examining the relationship between the translation and the original, the translator may not only be able to test how 'true' the translation is but can also explore areas of literary understanding which the process of translation often enters.

Un-translatability

The problem of untranslatability occurred in finding the exact lexical term related to flora and fauna, also certain equipment, dresses, ornaments, etc. For instance, '*Zha*' plant in the story of '*Dunai*' is explained as 'Mate-like spread,' due to the absence of the exact lexical term in the target language so is also with the word '*Kheloukizii/Morung*' as girl's dormitory. The term *Morung/Kheloukizii*^{iv} evokes an entirely independent Poumai culture. If the word '*Morung/Kheloukizii*' be translated just as girl's dormitory, the whole cultural package gets lost in translation as girl's dormitory can be located in any other culture as well. In the context of Poumai, the word *Kheloukizii* refers to a specific boy's/girl's chamber wherein both young girls and boys own a separately dormitory, usually in groups of 5 to 8 or can go further up irrespective of blood relationship. Both young boys and girls have distinct role and purpose in their respective dormitory; the boys are trained in the art of warfare, code of conduct, traditional values, etc., while the girls get themselves trained ranging from moral codes to handicrafts and their role in the welfare of the society.

Thus, this institution comes to play a very significant role in imparting the cultural values of the Poumais. This particular cultural aspect is not found in the target language thus finding the exact lexical term becomes impossible.

The other point to be noted is that no effort is made to gloss over the context of the original for the sake of easy readability. In fact, this will lead to a distortion of the stories, flattening out the cultural nuances.

Instead, adding of explanatory clause has been made in order to let the readers understand the cultural nuances of the source language. The decision to retain certain original words of the stories was due to the absence of cultural equivalence in the target language, i.e., English. For this reason, words like *Zha*, *Kheloukizii*, etc., have been retained and footnoted in English in order to preserve the cultural specificity instead of giving neat and sanitized English version of the terms in English. Therefore, it becomes necessary to highlight the cultural specifics in the original rather than allowing it to be subsumed within the target language.

Sense to Sense Translation

Translating of this folktale is based on sense to sense translation, as it was not possible to literally translate word to word because of the different structure in the two languages. Poula (Poumai dialect) in many ways, its meaning is determined by the sense of the sentence, for instance, there are so many words which have the same spelling but the same words determine different meaning in different contexts. For instance, word *Pou* means differently in different contexts. The word '*Pou*' denotes the name of the ancestor of the Poumais but the same word also denotes father. Many of the same words when placed in different structure of a sentence denote different meanings. Thus the meaning in many cases is derived/determined from the sense of a sentence. In verbal communication, they can be recognized through intonation, but in written it spells exactly the same.

Conclusion

One can surely say that translation certainly, in the present global world, gives a common platform for languages and cultures to interact. However, one cannot negate the problems, theoretical or practical, which are inherent in the process. At the same time, translation is not always about loss, it is also about gain; it is this larger gain, which forces the act of translation to happen. The very act of translating Poumai folk tales ensures that it is conserved for the posterity including a larger readership, though might have some problems with the translated version. Yet, it gives a chance to understand, know, and enter an alien culture, through such translations.

^{iv}According to R. Vashum in his book "Naga's Right to Self Determination" (p-24), the word *Morung* is not a Naga word but is probably of Assamese origin and is now accepted as a general term of this particular ritual. Each of the Nagas has different name for it, in the case of Poumai, they called it *Kheloukizii*.

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