

## A Few Thoughts on the Translation of Poetry

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### Abstract

Ghosh recounts her experience of making English translations of some poems by the popular Bengali poet, Joy Goswami, which had been done interactively. She examines the function of intonation and stress in speech, as well as the sounds of words in generating meaning, considering these aspects of language as being important elements in the translation of poetry. After a brief survey of the varying methods of translation based upon the target readership over the years she attempts to show from her experience the problems of the practice in the school curriculum and the literary environment.

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The history of translation is certainly as old as written history but we might go further back and claim that it is probably as old as the history of human speech. The very act of verbal communication presupposes translation in the wider sense, for if we take translation to be the means by which one language finds expression in another then speech itself is translation of non-verbal form of expression (such as body language, sign language or suggestive sounds) into the verbal.

Historical linguistics shows how the similarities among certain basic words in different languages led to the discovery of the Indo-European family of languages. On the other hand, synchronic linguistics describes the function of intonation and stress in speech as being one of the essential elements of linguistic comprehension, what is called the conative function of language. Given that our ancestors expressed themselves through a series of clicks and grunts, the fact that these sounds came in time to be translated into the speech of different languages around the world would suggest that although the words may be quite different the sounds of essential human emotions, expressed with a particular intonation and stress, will be similar in most languages. Intonation and stress might be taken as elements in speech that can often express meaning better than words. Our vocabulary might be limited but the form of expression is infinite. To make this clearer, let's take a word like 'love'. In some of the Indian languages the words for it, *bhalobasa*, *prem*, or *pyar*, do not resemble the word 'love' in that the consonants sounds are quite different. But if we consider the

vowel sounds we find a certain common softness in the open vowels which, combined with the non-palatal/non-velar consonants, produce a positive vitality. Yet the significance of this word will vary according to the tone in which it might be uttered: soft, cold, scornful, piteous, blissful etc. To develop an ear for this is an important aspect in the practice of translation, particularly of poetry. Bringing home the lives and thoughts of those who might never meet through a common language has been the task of translation. If the writer is to be seen as the catalyst between tradition and the individual talent the translator may be seen as the catalyst between the writer and the global reader.

Translation from mother tongue to English was first undertaken to acquaint the western world with the culture and identity of one's country. Rabindranath Tagore's own recreations of selected poems in *Geetanjali* won him the Nobel Prize, bringing him world-wide prestige, after which his recreations were translated into several different languages, such as German, Dutch and Spanish. The English *Geetanjali* lent itself to retranslation by others, in which, however, while some of the renderings were passable, in others the poems were often inadequately done or even mutilated. It certainly affected Tagore's reputation abroad, and while we know of Wilfred Owen reading Tagore's poems in the trenches and Yeats's mild admiration of him as a poet we also know of Bernard Shaw's unfair nickname for him, Stupendranath Begorr. This leads to the obvious question, what makes a translation successful? Rather, what does the translator aim to do, and what is the impulse behind the act of translation? In trying to answer these questions, I would like to tackle the last one first, that is, what makes a translator translate? They say, 'He who can, writes; he who can't, teaches'. Many would, perhaps, add 'translates' as well. This is because the urge to translate has a vicarious root: to make another's writing one's own. The urge to communicate the pleasures one receives from a work of literature through translation comes only second. In trying to make other's work one's own, the translator tries to recreate in a different tongue. This cannot be a mechanical process. As we all know, the impulse or inspiration to create is not all. Without skill in the craft we end up making an ordinary water jug while the amphora languishes in the imagination. The impulse itself must also be held in check. Simple transliteration will not make any work come alive; there must be a method of choosing.

The translator has to keep two things in mind: faithfulness to the original text; and the structure of the language it is being translated into that can best express the spirit of the text. Word for word translation cannot achieve this. This was not the method of the early writers of Indian literature in English who sought to create a new idiom, culture-specific English. There was a sociological context for this, namely the target readership, which was the West. Unlike writers of the 70s onwards the target readership was not the bilingual Indian or one to whom English came easier than the native tongue. Thus we have the colourful invectives of Mulk Raj Anand's novels, which would really be too long to sustain were they to be spoken out loud, or the terms used by Raja Rao,

such as 'flower bed,' (to mean 'marriage bed'), or 'government' and 'master' as forms of addresses which mean something quite different from what the native speaker might understand by them, and can cause confusion. Such use of the English language dates the text and confines it within a certain period of linguistic development that robs it of contemporaneity. One of the reasons that most modern readers go to William Radice's or Ketaki Kushari Dyson's translations of Rabindranath's poetry rather than the poet's own is that there is Victorian flavour in the use of the English language by the poet himself that renders it foreign.

Regarding vocabulary, writers in the past addressing a readership they assumed needed to be acquainted with the specifics of Indian culture felt obliged to explain types of food, clothing and bedding to their readers within the narrative itself. Thus, a *samosa* became a 'fried dumpling', *chapatti*, 'bread', *dal*, 'lentil soup', *paan*, 'betel' leaf wrapped around betel nuts and spices', *kaantha*, 'a cotton blanket' and *aanchal*, 'a veil', etc. What happens here is that by such explanations the object assumes a shape and dimension in the imagination that is not quite accurate, while the course of the narrative is disturbed.

The writer today is not bound by such constraints of code, thanks to the tremendous expansion of the OED, which bears witness to the living quality of English that has enabled the growth of so many Englishes. For instance, the writer can now call a chapatti by its name instead of using its generic name, 'bread', and thereby add to its several linguistic and cultural paradigms, such as pizza, tortilla, croissant, baguette, bun, nan, etc. This makes translation simultaneously culture-specific and global. Of course the translator should not overdo it and use a vernacular term when there is a perfectly accurate one in English, for that would put the translated text in the danger of unintelligibility.

In translating into English from Bengali the syntax often poses a problem. Sentences in Bengali do not follow the SVO structure of the English sentence but the SOV or VSO and often, no verb at all. Hence, frequently in translation the verb is inserted in the passive voice in English, thereby losing the energy of the original sentence. To avoid this, the structure has to be reversed sometimes and the active voice used wherever possible, depending on the sense and the context. Years ago when I was translating Akhtar Uzzaman Ilyas's short story, *Millir Haatey Stengun*, for the magazine, *Sampark*, I was faced with the two choices for the title. *A Stengun in Millie's Hand* would be a literal translation and not incorrect in terms of syntax and meaning. However, this title appeared tame, lacking the element of surprise of the original. I found that if I were to write instead, *Millie Holds a Stengun*, the sense was conveyed better although the verb did not occur in the original. The point that I am trying to make is that translation must be free in order to be faithful. This is with regard to prose. In the case of poetry the rules are slightly different.

Style is an important element in translation of prose; in poetry it is selection and

combination of words that preserve the flavour of the original and also the rhythm that marks the poem. In Roman Jakobson's words:

The poetic function (of language) projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination... (in poetry) one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence, word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress, prosodic long is matched with prosodic long, and short with short, word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary, syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals with no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are more and stresses'.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the synaesthetic element in poetry, the function of sound-meaning, is essential to the composition of the translated poem. This is why, while it is possible to translate any piece of prose it is not so with poetry. Certain poets are untranslatable if justice is to be done to their poetry. One such poet is Shakti Chattopadhyay. Although there have been one or two intrepid translators who have attempted it, the less said about these translations the better. This is a translation of a poem called *Chabi* (the key) from one of his early collections, *Dhormeo achho giraffeo achho*.

The key:

Till this day here lies with me  
Lost long ago, your dearest key  
You open still that chest of yours?  
Touching your lips, that beauty spot,  
A new land has my own heart got?  
Now, right now, I write to thee.  
Your key is there in loving care,  
The time has come for you to dare,  
Please write, if you do want it back?  
In memories of no big need  
Your tears, may.., like a seed  
Please write, if you do want it back?

The translations of his last poems by T. Shankarlal Bhattacharya published by Parabaas are of better quality but the essence of Chattopadhyay's poetry has not been adequately captured. This is because Chattopadhyay's poetry is deeply entrenched in the lilt of sounds in words which is almost impossible to duplicate in English without a loss of the sense. The same thing can be said about the translations of Jibananda Das's

1 Roman Osipovich Jakobson was a Russian linguist and literary theorist, who, with Viktor Shlovsky and Nikolai Trubetzkoy was part of the Prague School of Linguistics, after the Formalists were forced to flee Russia under Stalin's rule, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Jakobson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Jakobson).

poetry barring those by Clinton Seely who in my opinion comes close to capturing the poetry of Banalata Sen:

For thousands of years I roamed the paths of this earth,  
From waters round Ceylon in dead of night to Malayan seas.  
Much have I wandered. I was there in the grey world of Asoka  
And Bimbisara, pressed on through darkness to the city of Vidarbha.  
I am a weary heart surrounded by life's frothy ocean.  
To me she gave a moment's peace - Banalata sen from Natore.  
Her hair was like an ancient darkling night in Vidisa,  
Her face, the craftsmanship of Sravasti. As the helmsman,  
His rudder broken, far out open the sea adrift,  
Sees the grass-green land of a cinnamon isle, just so  
Through darkness I saw her. Said she, "Where have you been so long?"  
And raised her bird's nest-like eyes-Banalata Sen from Natore.  
At day's end, like hush of dew  
Comes evening. A hawk wipes the scent of sunlight from its wings.  
When earth's colours fade and some pale design sketched,  
Then glimmering fireflies paint in the story.  
All birds come home, all rivers, all of this life's tasks finished.  
Only darkness remains, as I sit there face to face with Banalata sen.<sup>2</sup>

However, such a poem fails in its effect when read aloud. The music of the syllables in the name, Banalata Sen, will be lost without a Bengali rendition, as will the significance of 'Natore'. As such it remains within the sphere of academic interest. In translating poetry it happens very often that the poem chooses you rather than the other way round.

A few years ago I worked over an extended period of time on a number of translations of Joy Goswami's poems in close association with the poet himself. Joy Goswami is one of the most popular Bengali poets of recent time. The occasion came about when Goswami was part of the International Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and needed to take along a few selected poems in translation. Subsequently we worked together on the anthology of his translations published by Worldview Books in 2007 under the name, *Part Autobiography*. Working with Goswami was, perhaps, one of the most rewarding experiences in my life. Having read all the poetry that he had written one had a fair idea of the recurrent images in his poems and the way in which their significance changed from the early poems in the later ones: images of rain, clouds, storm and thunder, to mention a few.

<sup>2</sup> Jibananda Das, translated by Clinton B. Seely, an American academic and translator, and a scholar of Bengali language and literature, has translated the works of Ramprasad Sen and Michael Madhusudan Dutt and written a biography of the Bengali poet, Jibananda. The quoted poem has appeared in various publications and is also available online, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clinton\\_B.\\_Seely](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clinton_B._Seely)

One of the advantages of working with the poet was that, although heavily influenced by Jibanananda Das and Shakti Chattopadhyay, he uses a popular diction and simple rhythm that gives his poems, at least some of them, what has been called 'a ballad-like simplicity'. Of course, all his poetry is not quite translatable, for he, too, is deeply sensitive to sound-meaning. This is one of the reasons that he did not want one his most popular poems, *Malatibala Balika Bidyalay*, translated. The alliterative lilt of the successive syllables in this can never be adequately rendered, nor can the name, Benimadhab, have the same suggestion. In translating Goswami's poems I was drawn more towards his lyrical ones and his dramatic monologues, rather than his long narrative poems. Another advantage, which is general to poetry, was that one could play a bit with the syntax without making nonsense of it. Translating poetry proved to be more fun though more difficult than translating prose.

There was a certain way in which we went with the job of translation. Goswami would read the poem aloud in the manner in which he intended it to be read, thus defining the rhythm. Then we would talk about it, how it came to acquire its present shape. In translating a poem one tried as hard as one could to keep to the original, including the length of the lines, for it is in this form the meaning is generated. Sometimes this posed a problem, especially when there was a rhyming pattern in the original. In such cases I had to break up the lines in order to maintain a close relationship with the text. One of his early poems that I translated was *Meghbalikar Jonyo Rupkatha*, which went under the name *For a Cloudgirl*. I had given the title, *A Fairytale for a Cloudgirl* at first in order to maintain fidelity but the poet advised me to omit the first two words in it. The poem follows a lyrical pattern, telling of the poetic process through a tale of fantasy. Much of it is written in rhyme and so I made use of assonance, breaking the lines where I could to create a similar pattern, as for instance in these lines which occur in the beginning of the poem:

When as a cloud I used to play  
With a group of clouds far away, one day  
A little cloudgirl said to me,  
'Tell me, boy,  
Who may you be?'  
'I am puff!' I said.  
Angrily she turned to me,  
'A lie! Can such a name  
Ever be?  
'Of course, it can,' I said to her,  
But first you must  
Listen to my story'.

Mythological and historical allusions are integral to most of Goswami's poems, which we decided to leave as they were, adding a glossary at the end where they could be explained. The choice of a word from its paradigms was mine and based upon

sound meaning as much as possible. Thus I used 'Cloudgirl' instead of 'cloudmaiden' although 'maiden' would be a closer choice than 'girl'; and 'golden doe' instead of 'golden stag' or 'golden deer'. A later poem, also based on the poetic process is *The Storyteller*, which is very differently written. In translating this Goswami advised me not to try to keep rhyme but to catch the rhythm. This was because the flow of energy followed different patterns in the two poems. While the energy shifts from agitation to calm in the first poem, in the second it shifts from a dormant condition to the violent upheaval of lightning. The poet felt that this had to be conveyed by the difference in rhythm. Thus the beginning and the ending of the two poems follow a diametrically opposite parabola of movement. If one were to compare the beginning of the poem just quoted and the second then this would become clear:

Ash roams around the room; covered in darkness  
Paper, book, cover, a dead bird's call-  
Ash roams around the room, held down underneath it  
One chest full of tales seeks to shoot up through the floor.  
You can't help it, you are a storyteller  
One day you had been a part of those tales  
Grasping your throat you have strangled again and again  
The scream of pleasure when death was happening.

The transition occurs in two alternative views of creation. Creation can come through isolation from the mundane world into a dream world where one can catch a glimpse of the evasive 'golden doe'. Creation also can come through the torturous, unwilling, yet acquiescent death of the old when the poet submits to the force of his existence as a poet, where he is but an instrument for the muse.

The ending of the two poems thus presented this contrast, which had to be captured in the rhythm. Thus the poem ends with:

From his cottage, then, the poet looks  
Away into that far off land;  
Beyond the woods,  
Beyond the fields,  
Beyond the river,  
Where there will be rain forever;  
Where no one ever goes,  
Where none has been before.  
And the poet sees that distant land,  
Where nearabouts the forest spring-  
Prancing here, prancing there,  
A sunshine clouddoe there he sees,  
His childhood's golden doe  
Once more.

The end of The Storyteller goes:

But you are restless, so there's no peace, none-  
The fire's not coming down, the fire doesn't lower its face!  
Where will it drop the lightning, where ought it to drop; it is  
This anxiety that makes the cloud beat its head against the skies  
Where is that tree? That which can calmly take the lightning?  
One tree and another and another for  
This test it has burnt; in the scorched darkness  
Ash roams around the room, paper, book, picture...  
The cover on the book; beneath, the dead bird's call-  
The lightning wanders in the air, says, 'Will you be my tree?'  
What? Again? The floor cracks - gapes-  
A chest full of tales shoots up through the floor, poet !

After each translation was done Goswami read it aloud to test that the translated version corresponded with the aural quality of the original. I took satisfaction from the fact that the translations were not mine alone but the poet's as well.