

The Power of Translation: A Christian Reading

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Abstract

Thadathil takes on from the history of Bible translations for religious purposes and reads secular implications into it and goes onto apply the hermeneutical premises and principles derived from Biblical translations as providing potential perspectives and keys for furthering the cause of translation across linguistic and cultural barriers. The relevance of translation is emphasized as contained in the opening a text provides for newer understandings within ever expanding cultural contexts.

Keywords: Empowerment, Bible, Hermeneutics, Enculturation, Christian

Discourse around the theme of Translation is vast. This paper intends to look at the thematic from the perspective of Christian heritage, taking to account the history of the institution hosting the seminar with its specific religio-cultural identity along with the equally strong belief that in this age, as in the past and in other locations, a sharing of perspectives from vastly differing contexts does enliven the discourse intended to be traversed with friends across linguistic and cultural borders. The paper therefore resorts to extracting information from the history of the churches and their attempts to have the Bible translated for purely religious purposes, and yet having had an unintended but widely applicable impact on the modalities of translation at large.

The Sacred Writ and Translations

In the western literary history probably the first translators were the Romans. Cicero and Horace (first century BC) were probably the first theorists who distinguished between 'word-for-word translation and sense-for-sense translation.' Their comments on translation practice influenced the following generations of translation up to the twentieth century. The need for translation however will get predated to the story (with probable historical base) of the Tower of Babel in the Bible (Genesis 11:1-9) where the origin of the diverse languages are explained as the outcome of human hubris bringing about divine sanction in the form of scattering of peoples (seeing to usurp divine power and authority).¹ Translation thus became the possibility and the need of moving to the foreign/the other in the other's language. This need in turn laid the basis for dialogue by approaching the other in and through one's own perceptive limitations.

1 John H. Walton, "Is there archaeological evidence of the Tower of Babel?" in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 [1995]: 1 pp.55-75, <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-abr/abr-a021.html>

When Augustine, the first prominent philosopher-theologian of the early Church entered the scene there were two prominent versions of the Bible. The Septuagint LXX, done on request by Ptolemy to the Jews and for the preparation of which 72 persons were involved because of which the name septuagint, and Aquila's translation, the more orthodox version (for the Jews). On the question of versions and renderings of the Bible, Augustine comments thus: "We are justified in supposing that the seventy translators received the spirit of prophecy: and so, if they altered anything by its authority and used expressions in their translation different from those of the original, we should not doubt that these expressions also were inspired by God....² He goes on to explain his intent further: "[A]nything in the Septuagint that is not in the Hebrew text is something which the same spirit preferred to say through the translator, instead of through the prophets, thus showing that the former and the latter were alike prophets".³

Augustine thus in acknowledging the debate around translation is also acknowledging the possibility of diverse languages and revelation being affected by them. Here we see also how Christianity right from the start is intrinsically related to seeing the problem and possibilities around the diversity of languages in and through the process of translation.

In contrast to the position held by Augustine, his contemporary Jerome, the translator par excellence of ancient Christianity, did not claim such divine rights for the translator but nonetheless regarded the freedom of the translator to write (speak) for all humanity as coming from the very advent of Jesus Christ. This is a theological argument for the freedom a translator ought to have or is meant to have if the job is to be done. In both of them there is manifest a sense of openness and this characterizes the Christian tradition ever since.

Three reasons can be identified for the special openness Christianity showed towards translations and linguistic diversity: first the canon of Scriptures was established amidst a complex translation environment of Hebrew corpus already translated into Hellenistic and Latin linguistic worlds. Second, the conversion of the Roman Empire into Christianity in 4th century CE necessitating translation of Scriptures to Latin along with Latin becoming liturgical language. This conflict of interest again repeats itself in the translation process into vernacular in the Renaissance period. Third, from a theological and literary perspective, there was felt need to show that the sacred Scriptures were superior to the then existing secular literature, from Homer to Virgil. In attempting to achieve this goal Jerome was accused of being poetic and literary in his translations and thereby losing out on faith.⁴

2 St Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. D Knowles tr. H. Bettenson, Hammandsworth, 1972, p.640, 822, quoted in Frederick Boyer, 'Why do you not understand what I say?' *Concilium*, 2010/2, 34.

3 *Ibid.*, p.34.

4 *Ibid.*, p.35.

These two historical instances of grappling with the issue of translation of the religious scriptures of Christian tradition point to certain perennial issues in translation. Can one be absolutely faithful in the process of translation? Can the translator presume certain freedoms in the process of inserting, 'trans-lating'? Can there be a translation without the linguistic-literary capabilities of the translator colouring the product? One could in a way assert that all of the issues of translation of later centuries have revolved around these issues ever since they were addressed by Augustine and Jerome.

Given cultural context in which religion played a major role in society, the translation of the Bible remained subject to many conflicts revolving around the western theories and ideologies of translation for over a thousand years. These conflicts based on Biblical translations intensified with the coming of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, when "translation came to be used as a weapon in both dogmatic and political conflicts as nation states began to emerge and the centralization of the Church started to weaken, the evidence being in linguistic terms by the decline of Latin as a universal language".⁵

The Relevance of Translation

Translation as an impossible task hit me when an in-law of mine brought out a (kreuz) cross-stitch book in German knowing that I had completed a four months course in that language successfully. With all my presumed proficiency on the one hand and lack of even basic knowledge of sewing machines and the art revolving around it, I could make neither head nor tail out of the instructions, than being able to read it perfectly. This apparent inability to enter fully the real world of the other represented in the text to be translated is a common experience of any Translator.

'Myself I deem not worthy and none else
Will deem me. I, if on this voyage then
I venture, fear it will in folly end.
Thou, who art wise, better my meaning know'st
Than I can speak'⁶

This verse from Dante as he begins his second Canto of *Inferno* unveils a sentiment familiar to any translator or creative writer, because a translation (especially of an inspired book like Bible or Koran) means being 'at the threshold' with 'apprehension'. In another sense if we want to make sense today of an ancient text, as Boyer reminds, "It is precisely the perceived inadequacy that calls for and justifies a translation".⁷

5 McGuire S Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, London, Methuen, 1980, p. 43 quoted in <http://www.translationdirectory.com/articles/article1695.php> accessed on 19 February 2012.

6 Dante's *Inferno*, Canto II, vv.19-21, tr. H.Cary, London, 1891, p.20, quoted in Frederic Boyer, *Concilium*, 2010/2, p.41.

7 Frederic Boyer, "Why do you not understand what I say?" in *Concilium* 2010/2, 40.

Similar sentiments predated even Dante as Boyer brings to our attention the words of Origen from second century CE in his *Philokalia* commenting on Paul's reference to earthenware (2Cor4.7: this priceless treasure we hold, so to speak, in a common earthenware jar - to show that the splendid power of it belong to God and not to us') and the least regard the early Greeks had for the Christian scriptures. For him too, 'the fragility of strength depended on the ability of each nation and of each generation to accommodate those writings in its own language, and therefore in its own eloquent flesh'.⁸

The very art of translating something from an ancient time, culture, context, faith tradition, like that of Bible, is to allow our own contemporary sensibilities to be reassessed. In this sense, the Bible is a book of rebellion and not merely a beautiful, soothing, musical or poetic piece of literature alone. Translators bring different sensibilities, ethical standards and world views into mutual encounter for the betterment of the 'reader'. Reading a translated text is to come into dialogue with not only author's time and people and culture - their standards of ethics and dharma - but also confronting the nuances of the language of the text as well as that of the reader. In a frequently translated text like Bible there are several layers. Therefore 'translation' does not always mean 'merely shifting from one language to another' but rather more often "it means altering the way in which we ourselves listen to the language that we speak and write".⁹

Bible has been translated for different purposes among which the three outstanding reasons have been the legal-ethical, doctrinal-theological and literary-liturgical. These considerations take the source text in the process of being translated beyond its literal expressions. As Rabbi Ishmael of 2 CE is credited to have said, 'the Torah speaks the language of men (sic).¹⁰ The translator must therefore carry in his or her mind a comprehensive view of the whole work, of what has preceded and what is to follow, as well as of the meaning of particular passages. Besides, there is the discovery that the small details of idiom (or its absence) make or break a translation for as the saying goes, 'The little more, and how much it is! / The little less, and what worlds away!¹¹ In considering translation along these lines it is easy to perceive that a 'translation is always the creation of an original text.' It can indeed be a risky business though the very risk is at the basis of turning out a successful translation. Speaking of translating Bible or sacred Writ, it can be added that 'each new translation seeks to compensate for our exile from a sacred language' as to revive our responses and rekindle our interests and enliven our own language.¹²

8 *Ibid.*, 41.

9 *Ibid.*, 39.

10 Cfr. Frederick C. Grant, *Translating the Bible*, Edinburgh, Nelson & Sons, 1961, p. 6. The four principles upon which the history of biblical translation rested were according to William Tyndale: i. fidelity to Greek and Hebrew Texts, ii. Impartiality in interpreting Christian Doctrine, iii relevance of the translated language to time, and iv. literary suitability of reading for reading loud.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

12 Frederic Boyer, *op cit.*, p.38.

Seen from the perspective of faith, 'the translatability of the word is inherent in its very status as the word of God'. [This could easily be argued also from the tenets set down for the grammarians by the great Bhartrhari of Vakyapadiya fame in Indian tradition]. Its Indian equivalent would be the Mimamsa notion of Apaurasheyatva: The word will speak itself irrespective of the mediator/speaker/ transcriber/ translator/ writer/ author. The sacred word is uttered and the author is only the scribe who transcribes the 'heard/uttered word'.¹³ Augustine's words illumine this aspect further when he says that the language is a physical expression of something conceived by the mind: "I know that the truth which the mind understands in one way only can be materially expressed by many different means, and I also know that there are many different ways in which the mind can understand an idea that is outwardly expressed in one way".¹⁴ This explanation of Augustine goes along with his theory of illumination that the mind receives constant divine assistance.

While the above presumes certain perennality to the truth contained in the revealed word, there is also the aspect of the accretions to the word in and through translations. Every translation establishes a tradition for and among its readers. Consider King James Version vs the RSV (Revised Standard Version) in terms of Bible. Therefore the question arises as to whether translation amount to betrayal? And whether reading always involves a deception? In discerning and deciding about the issue, one cannot escape the issue of faith, seen from a theological perspective and the issue of pluralism from a secular perspective. Faith guarantees the legitimacy, the non deceptive, non betrayal of the text on the one hand, and the multiplicity of possibilities in re-reading the word offers the scope for secular plural understanding of the world, the word and its continually evolving meaning, on the other.

Translation, especially given its recent history, as a post colonial phenomenon, can be seen as a mitigation of experiences - the residues of the pre-modern with the aspirations of the modern - for cross cultural meaning generation. This dialogue of cultures gets infused into translation practices and the recording of these processes is what makes or adds to the relevance of translation studies. In the second half of the twentieth century, studies on translation became popular along with language teaching and learning at schools. From there on emerged the variety of methods and models of translation. For instance, the 'grammar-translation method' studies the grammatical rules and structures of foreign languages whereas the 'cultural model' initiated the development of translation studies in the period. It required in translation not only a word-for-word substitution, but also a cultural understanding of the way people in different societies think.¹⁵ With these different models of translation replaying the

13 Cfr. Ashok AV., "Sequence from Patanjali to Postmodernity", Centre for English Literature, School of Critical Humanities, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/i_es/i_es_ashok_sequenc_frameset.htm accessed on 15 April 2012.

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, p.375 quoted in Boyer, op.cit., p.37.

15 Mohamed Mehrach, *Towards a Text-Based Model for Translation Evaluation*, Ridderkerk, Ridden print, 1977, p. 18. Cfr <http://www.translationdirectory.com/articles/article1695.php> accessed on 19 February 2012.

earlier concerns in new formats of ethnographical-semantic method as against the dynamic equivalent method the interpretative role of translation came to the fore.

Translation as Interpretation: the hermeneutics of translation

The demand for interpretation of the text into the translated language came from the cultural differences. The conversion process of peoples of tribal indigenous habitats into a Christian worldview and religio-cultural ambient that took place across the world called for interpretative tasks and it has been accomplished with varying degrees of skills and sensitivity to the people for whom the interpretation was intended or by whom it has been done.¹⁶In this regard the question arises as to whether there can be a distinction possible between translation for self (self-translation) which is different from author Translation referred in an earlier article by Anil Pinto. Learning to translate into one's own language what the other (of another language) is saying involves an interpretative act. In this process there is the moment wherein the mastery of the language becomes total and the 'learned language' is used as the means or the medium for translation/communication. Till this threshold is arrived at one is doing self-translation. After that one translates from the language of the other. In other words the capability to translate resembles or reveals mastery and comfortability over a language. I dare speak to you, for I know what you mean/know and how you know.¹⁷

In the above sense, translation is to language what dialogue is to pluralism. One's language and culture bear the imprint on the languages and cultures of others seen, read, or interpreted/critiqued. We see through our capabilities to see and understand, and these are constituted by our cultures. Therefore any translation is simultaneously an expression of one's own language for the other through his/her own language. However it is worth looking into whether translations allow one language to inhabit another, whether they are co-habitable or they are mutually exclusive?¹⁸

Translation is an act of interpretation; an act of mediation between the world of the author and his/her context to the reader and his/her times through the situation of the interpreter/translator. The logic of interpretation and the dynamics revolving around it comes into operation in taking 'translation' as a serious creative text creation process. Every text has a background and foreground; a context and a pretext.

16 Cfr. Diane Austin-Broos, "Translating Christianity: Some keywords, events and sites in Western Arrernte conversion", in *Anthropology*, University of Sydney, Australian Anthropological Society, 2010.

17 Same author doing the translation of the same work over a period of time, creating a second text or third text would also come under the category of self translation creating a floating text. This is what happens to the homilies of preachers using the same text over and over at the pulpit over the years. Same text, new translations!

18 From a pragmatic and economic point of view, translation is an industry that provides the business of sales on books not available in a language but is in demand. I am reminded of the surprise in finding title after title and author after author of English novels in the Bookstalls of the Airport and Main Railway station of Rome - but in Italian. In India the equivalent would be to find all regional big weights finding a place in the Hindi language section, because of the state support of creating a link language to match or overtake or supersede the dominance of English

Therefore, an authentic translation, if we can speak of such an act, should replicate the three dimensions of the interpretative act or process: (i) 'the author's intention ie., what someone meant or could have by writing the text to be translated/interpreted; (ii) the literal meaning - what the text says, given the individual meaning of words and the composed meanings of sentences (to be translated); (iii) the representative content - what the text as a whole means in the sense of what it represents'.¹⁹ Further, if these criteria are fulfilled, translation, philosophically speaking has to be considered an interpretation because it is an effort to create understanding across language barrier. Every translation work is an attempt at partial cross-cultural understanding. As a result, avoiding the pitfalls of misunderstanding as against nurturing the positive certainty of promoting understanding becomes crucial to translation work.

One of the assumptions behind correct translation is that one who knows both the source language as well as the target language other than the translator - would find recognition of one in the other. In the language of hermeneutics, or hermeneutically speaking, the translation to be truthful ought to be intersubjectively meaningful, or in other words, 'the interlocutors understand the terms and claims involved in the process of interpretation.' The criteria for avoiding faulty or inadequate translation can be compared with the misunderstanding or inability of interpretation: (i) if the translator is immature or mentally incompetent; (ii) psychological disinterest or repulsion towards the matter to be translated (as a result a non-serious attempt is made); (iii) attempts at translation if ill informed or vague it leads to inadequacy; (iv) if there are attempts to distort as to falsify through translation; and (v) if the translation is done from a recalcitrant and stubborn position.²⁰ On the contrary, following the Ricourian dictum 'understanding without explanation is blind.... Explanation without understanding is empty' the norm for an adequate translation can be worked out. Taking account of the linguistic and literary sides of translation activity it can be formulated that to explain more is to understand better, or still better, to stress on the linguistics of translation is to add better literary colour (style) to translation.²¹

Christian approach to translation, especially as it has been a means for reaching out to diverse cultures across the globe in an attempt to inculturate have been guided firstly, by the belief in its potential to promote a quality of life that is transhuman. The divine word and its potential to transform the human situation is what the translated text is intended to carry forward into new linguistic and cultural worldviews. Secondly,

19 Pol Vandervelde, *The Task of the Interpreter: Text Meaning and Negotiation*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005, p.11 quoted in Keith D'Souza, 'Principles and Processes of Interpretation,' *Divyadaan*, Vol.21 No.1 (2010) p.93.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Cfr Chapter 7, Book XIX of *City of God* quoted in Michael Cronin, *Translation and Identity*, New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 3-6. Augustine saw the diversity of languages as at the root of the conflicts and wars in the world because more than anything else language set humans apart from each other. In his words, "when men (sic) cannot communicate their thoughts to each other, simply because of difference of languages, all of the similarity of their common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship." He goes on to make his oft quoted saying that 'a man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than with a foreigner.'

translation being an interpretative act, of all the meanings the source text evokes, the translator has to choose which ones to emphasize, highlight, and which ones to subdue or overshadow. It nonetheless does not prevent the reader of the translated text going to interpret/translate by reading into it, the targeted language text, new meanings and openings making way for fresh interpretation-translation.²² Finally, it is often maintained that only a translation that is a re-creation can do justice to a work of art. Similarly the essence of Christian history of translation has been the re-creation of the story of empowering people by providing access to truth.

22 Translator is always present in and implicated by the translation. This is indeed true of the reading of material objects of any one particular culture over a period of time (diachronically) or across various regions (synchronically) wherein both the encoder and the decoder exercise the power of translation as John Dixon Hunt states: "Is it not more useful to think of teapots and other objects as signs?... The study of objects, like discourse, would then focus on a series of translations. And the questions would concern, first, how speakers...encode their messages, with certain goals, within given linguistic and other cultural contexts and, second, how hearers decode (in the case of objects this could be a user or a later historian) within different schemas, in fresh contexts that involve both pragmatic and intellectual control. In both encoding and decoding there is an act of translation, finding in one 'language' adequate terms to give a reliable account of something in another." Cfr. John Dixon Hunt (1993), 297 quoted in Finbarr B Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2009, p.9.