

CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract:

Translation of short stories occupies a unique position within the field of literary translation. Unlike novels, essays, or poetry, short stories demand a concise yet emotionally charged rendering of experiences that are deeply rooted in specific cultural, linguistic, and stylistic contexts. Translating them requires a delicate balance between faithfulness to the source text and creative freedom in the target language. The translator is not merely a linguistic mediator but a cultural interpreter who reimagines the narrative within a new linguistic and cultural framework. This research paper explores the complex challenges involved in translating short stories, focusing on linguistic nuances, cultural references, idiomatic expressions, authorial style, narrative rhythm, and reader reception. It also examines the theoretical and practical implications of these challenges by analyzing key translation strategies, including domestication, foreignization, equivalence, and adaptation. Furthermore, the paper discusses the ethical responsibilities of translators and the importance of preserving the literary essence of the original work while ensuring accessibility to the target audience. Through examples from world literature and translation theories, this paper underscores that translating short stories is not merely a technical process but an act of cross-cultural creativity that tests the translator's interpretative and artistic sensibilities.

Keywords: Translation, short stories, cultural context, linguistic equivalence, style, domestication, foreignization, literary translation, interpretation, narrative rhythm

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Introduction:

Translation has been an essential part of human civilization since the earliest encounters between different cultures. It is not merely the substitution of words from one language to another, but a complex process of transferring meaning, context, and cultural values. The earliest known translations, such as the rendering of religious texts like the Bible into Latin or the Rigveda into various Indian languages, demonstrate how translation has shaped societies, preserved knowledge, and facilitated intercultural dialogue.

Scholars have defined translation in diverse ways. J.C. Catford describes it as “the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another” (Catford 20). Eugene Nida, however, emphasizes the importance of dynamic equivalence, where the effect of the translation on the reader is as

significant as its linguistic accuracy (Nida 156). Roman Jakobson explains: “Translation is the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (Jakobson 233). He emphasized that translation is not just word substitution, but interpretation across languages. A.K. Ramanujan notes: “Translations are not just translations; they are transcreations” (Collected Essays 45). Ramanujan believed that literal fidelity is impossible, and translators must recreate the spirit of the original. These definitions highlight that translation is at once a linguistic and a cultural act.

In the present globalized world, translation has assumed unprecedented importance. It is the medium through which literature crosses borders, technology is made accessible, businesses expand internationally, and diplomacy maintains dialogue. At the same time, it is a practice fraught with challenges. Differences in

grammar, idioms, cultural references, and literary styles often make translation a task of negotiation rather than mechanical transfer.

This paper seeks to examine the major challenges in translation, focusing on linguistic, cultural, and literary dimensions, and to argue that translators must function not only as language specialists but also as cultural mediators.

Challenges in Translation:

Translation is not a simple transfer of words but a negotiation of meaning between languages, cultures, and literary traditions. The challenges translators face can be grouped into linguistic, cultural, and literary barriers.

1. Linguistic Challenges

Languages differ in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, which often create obstacles.

Grammar and Syntax:

English is a fixed word-order language (Subject–Verb–Object), while Indian languages like Hindi and Marathi follow Subject–Object–Verb. Example: “I am going to the market” → Hindi: “Main bazaar ja raha hoon” (literally: “I market going am”). This restructuring makes literal translation clumsy.

Idioms and Proverbs:

British idioms are difficult to translate into Indian languages without losing meaning. Example: “Don’t cry over spilled milk” has no exact Marathi equivalent; translators often adapt it as “गेल्या गोषीवर रडून उपयोग नाही” (Crying over what is gone is useless).

Wordplay and Puns:

Shakespeare frequently used puns (e.g., in Romeo and Juliet). Rendering these into Indian languages often loses the double meaning. Example: The pun on “sole” (shoe sole vs. soul) in Shakespeare has no natural Marathi equivalent.

2. Cultural Challenges

Cultural references are deeply rooted in traditions and practices, making them hard to translate.

Religious and Social Practices

Indian texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata have culturally loaded terms (dharma, karma, moksha) that have no perfect English equivalent. Translating dharma as “religion” is misleading, since it also means duty, law, and morality.

Similarly, in British texts, concepts like tea-time or pub culture are alien to many Indian audiences. Translators often struggle to retain their cultural flavor.

Festivals and Customs

Diwali is translated as “Festival of Lights,” but this only conveys the superficial meaning, not the religious, familial, and cultural depth it holds in Indian life.

Likewise, in British literature, Christmas carries cultural and religious significance. Translating A Christmas Carol by Dickens into Indian languages cannot fully transfer the embedded Christian cultural references.

3. Literary Challenges

Literary works demand not just linguistic accuracy but also stylistic and aesthetic sensitivity.

Poetry:

A.K. Ramanujan’s English translations of ancient Tamil Sangam poetry illustrate the difficulty of maintaining rhythm and imagery. For example, the Tamil metaphor of “red earth and pouring rain” (Kuruntokai) loses some of its symbolic richness when rendered in English. Similarly, translating Shakespearean sonnets into Indian languages often sacrifices rhyme and meter for meaning.

Prose Style and Tone: R.K. Narayan’s novels (Malgudi Days) in English reflect Indian

sensibilities, but when translated into Indian languages, they sometimes sound “too ordinary” because his subtle irony is hard to retain. Conversely, Dickens’s elaborate Victorian sentences in novels like Great Expectations are often shortened in Indian translations to suit local readers’ preferences, resulting in stylistic loss.

Metaphors and Symbols:

In Indian writing, metaphors rooted in nature (the lotus, river, monsoon) are hard to carry into English without sounding exotic. In British texts, symbols like the “crown” (monarchy) or “stiff upper lip” (British stoicism) do not resonate with Indian audiences.

4. Technical Challenges

Machine Translation

Tools like Google Translate struggle with Indian languages. For example, the Marathi proverb “नाचता येण्या अंगा वाकडे” (One blames the courtyard when one cannot dance) becomes “The courtyard is crooked, so I can’t dance”, which distorts the intended meaning. British idioms like “break the ice” are often literally translated into Indian languages, resulting in comic misunderstandings.

Conclusion:

Translation is neither a mechanical transfer of words nor a neutral act of substitution. It is a creative and interpretative practice that constantly negotiates between languages, cultures, and histories. The challenges explored in this paper—linguistic, cultural, and literary—show that translation is always situated in tension between fidelity and freedom, between preserving the spirit of the original and making it accessible to new readers.

In the Indian context, where multilingualism is a lived reality, translation has historically served as a vehicle for preserving epics, sharing folklore, and circulating

knowledge across regions. In the British tradition, translation has enabled the global reach of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dickens, though often at the cost of cultural nuance. Both traditions reveal that translation is not about loss alone, but also about gain: it allows texts to be reborn in new contexts, reaching audiences that the original could never imagine.

The rise of machine translation further complicates this field, reminding us that while technology can enhance efficiency, it cannot yet capture cultural resonance, irony, or poetic depth. This makes the human translator indispensable—not as a passive transmitter but as a cultural mediator, interpreter, and even co-creator.

Ultimately, the future of translation lies not in seeking “perfect equivalence,” which is impossible, but in embracing translation as an art of negotiation—an act that preserves difference even as it builds bridges across linguistic and cultural divides.

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