

# Cultural Problems in Translation

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## Abstract

This paper deals with several instances where translation becomes difficult in the cultural context, with special reference to translating the Telugu novel, *Repoti Velugu* (1965?, Reprint 2010), written by Dwivedula Visalakshi, into English. One of the major problems in translation is the dissimilarity in the cultures of the source language and target language makes it very difficult to find a proper translation equivalent. The English culture, which gives the freedom to call any elder member of a family or a stranger by their names, is quite in contrast to the Indian traditional context. The honorific, usually attached to an 'Indian' address of an elderly person or one unacquainted, is missing in English. As such, it is not possible to use any rough equivalent with the status of a near equivalent. The quest for finding a perfect word is successful sometimes, but it also fails at many other times. This paper focuses on some of the crucial situations where one gets into a fix, not able to find proper translation equivalents.

**Keywords:** Dissimilarity, Translation Equivalent, Indian Culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Translation is a process of communicating a text from a source language by means of an equivalent text in a target language. The process gains its importance due to the basic fact that the actual sense of the text in a source language needs to be delivered into the target language. The act of translation is a very subtle process. It is easy and difficult at the same time. Even though the words used in the source language seem to be very ordinary, when it comes to the actual act of translating them into the target language, the real problem arises. All the commonly used terms of one culture may not find equal substitutes in the other. Even if they do, fitting the words contextually will be the next problem. Thus lies the responsibility on the shoulders of the translator to choose the best or nearest possible equivalents in order to achieve success in translation. Particularly when the source language and target language are from two different cultures, translation becomes even more challenging, as not all target languages give satisfactory substitutes to certain culture-specific words, usages and adages.

## 2. CONTEXT:

When we take Telugu and English cultures, for instance, we get confused as to how to put certain words successfully into the target language so that the essence of the word in the source language is not lost. In English culture, one seldom uses in any kind of addressing, the honorific suffix, like *-garu*, *-meeru*, *-andi*<sup>1</sup> and the like; or in the usage of second person singular, the honorific form is missing. This is mostly present in the Indian culture, though restricted to the middle class society. The upper - rich class people are modern enough to address husbands and other important people by name and other non-honorific expressions like *nuvvu*<sup>2</sup>. The remaining strata of the society continue revering all their elders, kith and kin, relatives, neighbours, teachers, guests and strangers. Their words and deeds are very

humble. The English culture which has not much consideration for relations beyond parents, grandparents, children and husband – fails to carry the deep rooted sense hidden behind the affectionate addressing of Indians.

### 3. EXCERPTS FROM THE NOVEL:

This paper is going to deal with instances where a clear problem in translating culture specific words into English can be found in the Telugu novel, *Repati Velugu*<sup>3</sup>, written by Late Smt. Dwivedula Visalakshi in 1965.

As the story line goes, Sarada, the protagonist of the novel, has two brothers and two sisters. Of the two brothers, one is elder and one is younger to Sarada. So, *anna* and *tammudu* can easily be translated as elder brother and younger brother. The meaning is conveyed clearly, with no element of confusion to the readers. But both the sisters of Sarada are older than her. In many instances a reference to *peddakka* and *chinnakka* is made. If the two words are translated as older elder sister and younger elder sister, or big elder sister and small elder sister - how would it sound? A possibility of using names instead of big and small is another alternative – Rajyam sister and Anasuya sister – but that too does not seem good enough. The best possible alternative was to use the names of the two sisters according to the context and retain the Telugu word *Akka* with a foot note, as has been done with all the other cases which will be discussed later, explaining the meaning of the word for the convenience of a non-Telugu reader.

In the same manner, Aravinda, one of the main characters in the novel, introduces a man named Rajendar Singh to Sarada, at one instance, saying, “*Maa bava, Rajendar*” – meaning “My cousin, Rajendar”. Do you think the simple English word ‘cousin’ can equal the depth one can experience by using the word *bava*? *Bava* is not just any other cousin – *bava* is a playmate, a companion, a friend, a confidant, may be a lover, a soulmate – and many more – according to the scale of consideration of his respective *maradalu* (this word is discussed in the next paragraph). So it is best to retain the word *bava* and add a footnote for its usage.

The husband of a sister is called brother-in-law by her siblings, translating the Telugu word *bavagaru* or *maridigaru* – the first one for the elder sister’s husband and the second one for the younger sister’s husband. Now how is that husband going to address the sister of his wife? If it is an elder sister, sister-in-law would be an apt translation for *vadinagaru*, then what about *maradalu*? Sister-in-law is not the compensatory word which can hold the mischief and naughtiness exhibited by the brother-in-law, when he plays pranks with her. When Sarada goes to visit Anasuya, the latter’s husband tries to flirt with Sarada. In that process, he calls her ‘*maradalu pilla*’ several times. Likewise the same problem is valid when a *bava* has to call his female cousin – *maradalu* is the word again. So, it also falls under the untranslatable category.

Topping all the other words filled with cultural specificity, *evandi*<sup>4</sup> is a very crucial term which needs a careful consideration. It is a specific female middle class address for the husband, not to be found either in the upper or lower classes. The upper class women find it comfortable calling their husbands by their names and the lower class people call their men as *emaiah*, *idigo*, *oye*<sup>5</sup> and the like, which becomes too casual an addressing. So it is only the middle class women, in general, who still treat their husbands with reverence, not raising themselves as equal to their husbands, nor dragging the status of their men too low as to call them as they call a pet. The affection and respect of a wife is seen at once in the word *evandi*. The very word reflects a wife’s love and affection, honour and respect, devotion and submission – all at once – towards her husband. To make one English word to express all these multiple emotions is a big

challenge. *Suniye* is a Hindi equivalent to that word. Calling the man in relation to their children, like *Raju ki Pitaji* – meaning Raju’s father – is yet another mode of addressing a husband. It becomes easier to translate *Raju ki Pitaji* than *Suniye* or *Evandi*. The possible alternatives which may be considered are – calling the husband by his name (the modern way), calling him ‘Dear’ (Tr. *Priya*) (shows love and intimacy, sounding more personal and intimate than social in the Indian context), Mister (Tr. *Peddamanishi*) (to show formal respect), Hello (Tr. *Mimmalne*) (a casual way of calling), Listen/Listen here (Tr. *Vintunnara*) (which is an equivalent of *Suniye*), Hey (Tr. *Oye*) (too casual addressing), Look/Look here (Tr. *Idigo*) (a way of drawing attention), Sir (Tr. *Mahanubhava*) (to show respect), Lord (Tr. *Naa Daivama*) (an extreme form of respect equating the husband to God, and too dramatic). Yet another mode of addressing a husband is by referring to his social status as someone’s father/ brother/son and so on. It might be practically impossible to make expressions like husband, my love, beloved, my lord, sire, look here, or any such alternative equate the sense and essence of the word *evandi*. To let it be – without translation – is possibly a better choice.

There are a couple more expressions which are linked to the word *evandi*, like *meeru*, *vachara*, *kurchondi*, *emannaru* and *randi*<sup>6</sup>. If we observe the suffixes in all those words and compare them with *nuvvu*, *ochava*, *kurcho*, *emannav* and *raa ra* or *raa ve*<sup>7</sup> – the first set of words are used with verbs taking an honorific suffix and the second set of words are casual. This implies that women treat and address their husband with respect, and the same kind of respect need not be shown – and hence it is not shown – when the children are being talked to. The same respect, which is being given to the husband, is also given to other important members of the family, elders, strangers, neighbours, guests, teachers, superiors, colleagues and so on.

As the saying goes –  
*Matru devo bhava,*  
*Pitru devo bhava,*  
*Aacharya devo bhava,*  
*Atithi devo bhava.*

meaning that parents (though mother is never addressed with that kind of respect), teachers and guests must be treated with respect equal to that which is given to god. Most of the above said persons might not be dealt with in a better way than a Mister or a Miss in an English context, so respecting people in an ‘Indian way’ is a new thing in that context. Indian Women, especially, were made to concentrate on a fifth entity – worshipping the *Husband*. Legendary women like Anasuya, Gauthami, Ahalya, Sita, Savitri, Rukmini were idolized for their unwavering faith and devotion to their husbands. It is with almost the same faith and devotion that women continued to worship their husbands on a par with God. All their lives used to revolve round the well-being of the husband and, next, his off-spring. This has evolved as an unbreakable convention. This is precisely why it is so crucial to find a justifiable equivalent to the word “*Evandi*” with which the Telugu women so dutifully call their husbands.

No English person might use an honour when he talks about his neighbour. But in Indian context (contemporary to the author), a neighbour is called *babai garu*<sup>8</sup>, *pinni garu*<sup>9</sup>, *mamma garu*<sup>10</sup> or *tatagaru*<sup>11</sup>, according to their age. All these can be illustrated in Sarada’s words as follows:

“*Marem...marem Bhushanam babai poyeduta*”.  
“It seems...it seems, Bhushanam uncle expired”.  
...*venudirigi Savitri pinni gari intiki vellindi.*  
... she turned back to go to Savitri aunt’s house

*Mammagari kurala empakam poortayindi.*

Granny has completed picking the vegetables.

None of the persons in the above situations are blood relatives of Sarada. Still she calls them as if they are her kith and kin. This is the manner in which the Telugu culture demonstrates its respect towards people around. Any visitor, any known person who comes across the path on the road, relatives of friends, and at the least, any elder person we might have to talk to on the street or in a shop is definitely addressed to using words of relationships like *babai garu*, *pinni garu*, *mamma garu* and so on. Uncle, aunt, granny, grand pa can substitute those terms as has been done now.

Coming to the work place, the boss, superior employees, co staff and subordinates whose age is more than that of the employee, an honorific suffix is sure to be used. Even the colleagues of the same age and same cadre refer to each other as *meeru*. This is merely out of the respect we show to people around us.

*Orey*, *ye ra* are specific words used to address boys by parents, siblings, other younger cousins or friends of the same gender. *Orey* is used to reach out to someone who is at a long distance or as a casual addressing instead of using the name. *Ye ra* is used when some information is sought for.

*Orey, itu raa* = Hey you, come here.

*Ye ra, ela unnavu?* = What pal, how are you?

On the last day of Sarada's PUC course, Aravinda takes part in the cultural programme of the farewell day. Mesmerised by Aravinda's performance, Sarada says, "*Dance entha бага chesave!*", meaning 'How well you have danced!'. But what about that suffix, 've' in the last word, *chesave*? Such culture specific words, again, are hard to translate.

*Osey* is a very common word which is used by a mother to address her female child in a casual tone, or by two female siblings or female friends. Some older women also address a girl, closer in association to them, as *osey*.

*Osey Sarada, itu raa ve.* = Hey, Sarada, come here.

*Entha pedda danivi aipoyave?* = How much you have grown!

These are some of the cultural features taken from the select novel, in order to illustrate the difficulty a translator faces while translating a culturally rich text from its source language into a culturally totally different target language.

## REFERENCES

Visalakshi, Dwivedula. *Repati Velugu*. Vijayawada: Sahithi Publications, 2010. Print.

## GLOSSARY

1. '-garu' is an honorific suffix added to a proper noun, 'meeru' and 'andi' are pronouns used instead of using the name with '-garu' as suffix.
2. 'Nuvvu' is you in the singular form of second person speech.
3. 'Repati Velugu' is the novel being translated as The New Dawn, a part of my Ph. D. research.
4. 'Evandi' is the term with which a wife addresses her husband.
5. 'Emaiah' is a casual way of calling a husband, 'idigo' is more casual than the former one, almost giving the meaning of 'look here' in a literal sense, 'oye' is as careless an addressing a husband as calling out to a stranger as 'hey'.
6. Meeru, vachara, kurchondi, emannaru, randi – you (addressing in second person, singular, honorific form); have you arrived?; please take a seat; what have you spoken?; please come – all in their hon-

orific sense.

7. nuvvu, ochava, kurcho, emannav, raa ra, raa ve – you (second person, singular form); did you come?; sit; what did you say?; come here, lad; come here, girl.
8. Babaigaru – paternal uncle
9. Pinnigaru – maternal aunt
10. Mammagaru – paternal grand mother
11. Tatagaru – grand father