**Translating from Bengali into English: Some thoughts**

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an essay

This write-up describes my singular experience in translating Bengali short stories into English. However, all literary translations deal with certain common problems—of idiolect and dialect, or the proper unit of translation, authorial voice, or tone, register, slang, and metaphor. As such, this write-up can’t help but re-plow ground familiar to other translators and readers knowledgeable about the topic. Still, given that translation has become a subject of considerable interest to Bangladeshis, it may be time we began talking to each other and shared our experiences.

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Any discussion about translating from Bengali to English ought to begin with the state of English in Bangladesh. After independence in 1971, a rather narrowly-defined linguistic nationalism led to English being largely mandated out of our national life. Even though there has been a rebound of sorts—English is now sought after as never before—the result of the policies of the previous decades is everywhere. A degraded English has become the norm—in schools, colleges, offices, in the marketplace, in reports, studies, and in all mass media.

Even English departments of universities have not been immune to this decline. Whole syllabuses have had to be restructured to accommodate “linguistics” courses besides the traditional literature ones, all in the hope of teaching students enough English language skills to be able to understand their subject matter. It is a telling comment on the state of English in Bangladesh.

It was not always thus.

In 1905 Begum Rokeya’s short story “Sultana’s Dream” began with the lines, “One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far as I remember, I was wide awake. I saw the moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamond-like stars, very distinctly.”

The lines display a marvelous, un-self-conscious ease with English.

Sixty-five years later, in the midst of the Liberation War, a Mukti Bahini guerrilla wrote a letter to his friend—“It is sometime around 10 o’clock in the evening. I am lying in my bed inside a hut. My bed is a wooden platform dug in about two feet below the floor level. The earth is raised all around me to give protection from the bullets & shells. One lamp burning with min. light. My “friends” the Punjabis are only 600 yards away…”

Again, one sees that wonderful ease with English.

That ease, which makes for naturalness of expression, is largely absent today. The “rot” of the forty-four years since independence has eaten away at it. This has had a decisive effect in two ways upon English writing in Bangladesh. One is that only those Bangladeshis fortunate to have had their education—and their English language training—in the West write creatively in English. Very few “locally or native schooled”— meaning local English-medium schools and universities—Bangladeshis do so at any sort of accepted, current South Asian standards.

The second effect has been on literary translations from Bengali to English. Such translations require a special versatility in English—or what is inelegantly termed the “target language”. Here, again with the exception of a handful of translators, Bangladeshi work has stagnated. Despite the number of English translations churned out each year, no case can be made that the quality of the average English translation has progressed from what it used to be at the time of independence.

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In 2003, when I became the literary editor of an English daily, I had to oversee its “literature” page. It was a mix of short stories (both in the original English and in translation), poems, book reviews, and sundry items. I discovered quickly that English translations submitted to me were generally unpublishable. Grammar and syntax, and even punctuation, were distorted; tenses mixed up within the same paragraph—sometimes within two lines; typos and misspellings were frequent. A limited English vocabulary frequently made for a tonal monotone in the translations. Even the “better” translators often slipped into “Babu” English, defined accurately by one critic as the “excessively stilted, archaic, and bombastic idiom that manages at the same time to be formal and sentimental”. As a whole, the translation enterprise in Bangladesh had no order to it; there were no established criterion, no set standards.

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It was obvious that a lack of proper—and sometimes even basic—English language skills was the Achilles heel of our translators. It was manifestly not any absence of commitment, energy, or literary passion on their part. In fact, it was obviously a true love of literature that kept these translators gamely driving on ahead, but in the end, while their bodies and minds were more than willing, their language skills had decidedly given up the ghost. Incidentally, by the same token, it is not surprising that some of the best translations of Bangladeshi authors are by non-Bangladeshis. Radha Chakravarty’s Crossings, for example, is a case in point.

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A newspaper broadsheet page has limited space. Also limited, understandably, were the attention spans and time of my busy, urban readership. The translated stories had to be 3000 words maximum, with 22-2400 being the ideal count. I further decided that it would be best not to go with the classical writers: Rabindranath, Buddhadeb Bose, etc., since their works are widely accessible in the original Bengali, as well as the fact that their work could be heavy going for newspaper readers. Modern Bengali short stories, contemporary authors—writing that would provide some snap and crackle on the page—therefore were my best bet. Additionally, they would also provide snapshots about how the form had evolved in the hands of Bengali writers, and who were some of the current writers of the genre, their style and preoccupations.

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I wanted translations that were flowing and idiomatic, that ran without a hiccup and hitch on a broadsheet page. It got me interested in what are termed as “transcreations” or “creative translations”—defined as translations where the primary aim is not absolute fidelity to the original text. The aim instead is to evoke feelings and emotions among readers in the new language similar to the original, at achieving emotional correspondences between the two. Three authors to me were outstanding in this regard. Sujit Mukherjee’s Translation as Recovery was wonderful, with its description of translation activity in pre-colonial India. Translation then was actually transcreation, from Sanskrit into the regional bhashas as well as between the bhashas. It had been a joyous and fertile activity for a thousand years before the British introduced a different set of rules and it came to a stop. Sukanta Chaudhri’s Translation & Understanding was a difficult book but one which rewarded close reading. It examined translation in terms of the cultural hegemony of English, where the “local” Indian text, the English translation and the context itself—the cultural space occupied by the first two—underwent a complex re-ordering. Sukanta has had a lifelong engagement with Tagore and the chapter on translation and creation dealt deeply with the issue. The third was not a book per se but the writings of Professor P Lal of Writers Workshop, Kolkata. He had pronounced English to be an Indian language, and championed transcreation in a very Indian, vocal, and infectious manner. It was an idea he put into practice with his “transcreation” of the Mahabharata into readable modern English—an epic has to be “alive,” he said, and to do so it must be recreated in the language of the age.

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As I began translating I soon ran into problems. The first was the overly short Bengali sentence favored by Bangladeshi writers. Translated literally into English, they were an unmitigated disaster, with a staccato sound and feel. In extreme cases, they even gave the unfortunate impression that the narrator had an abbreviated consciousness, or some mental impairment. Strangely enough, this was a style almost exclusively confined to Bangladeshi writers; it is rare in writers from West Bengal.

Innumerable examples exist of the staccato effect in translations by Bangladeshis.

One example is the translation of Syed Shamsul Haq’s celebrated novel Khelaram Khele Ja (titled rather oddly in English as Keep It Up Kilroy)

Ominous dusk sinking down over the fields. Not a sound to be heard. And darkness gluing to his feet, as he walked. Yet on he went. Holding tight to Hasnu’s hand. Determined to reach home. Before night fell.

Here, unfortunately, the sense of a normal English sentence has been lost. There is no natural rhythm to the prose.

To be readable, to be enjoyable, the natural rhythm of the English language has to be reproduced at least in some measure in the translated text. A chopping, staccato beat is exhausting to readers of English, and soon robs all content of sense. The Oxford Guide to Plain English suggests that the average natural length of an English sentence is about 15-20 words. Over the course of a whole text this length is varied with longer and shorter sentences to impart rhythm and beat to English. That, in turn, dissolves invisibly with content and meaning to make the translation come alive.

Without this sense of rhythm no translated English text will read naturally and fully. And this lack of rhythm can be further exacerbated by a small or inadequate vocabulary at the translator’s command; a tonal monotone combined with a staccato beat makes for a truly miserable reading experience.

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A significant problem for me was the acute difference in the emotional registers between the two languages and cultures. Bengalis are a gregarious, vocal, and politically addicted race, with a narrative style that is at a higher pitch than English. These are properties of the culture, and thereby of the language. An example may be the style of news reporting in our national media. A child dying in a road accident is usually reported in a florid, emotional style—how a mother’s lap is now empty and cold, a once-happy household is without light or glow, and a grandmother entering the dark night of the soul. This injection of adverbs and adjectives, the insertion of the reporter’s own views into what is a routine road fatality news item is culturally sanctioned, and indeed, demanded. Translated into English, the same style becomes untenable. This higher pitch, in implicit and explicit ways, is present in Bengali writing, and is hard to translate into English. Unless it is a deliberate effect, frequent and rapid emotional highs and lows can make the English translation seem off-center and unbalanced. It is like being on the road in Dhaka after some time one sees not individual cars but simply the interlocking grid of traffic jams, of lines of locked metal. So too, the pitch itself soon becomes a distracting noise in the text; content gets lost.

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Social registers in Bengali speech are a related, if familiar, problem. All Bangladeshi translators know about the difficulties presented by the“Tui,”“Tumi,” and the “Aapni” forms of address invoking different generational and social standing. The problem gets a little more acute when such voice registers are deliberately, and heavily, employed with diction and vocabulary to indicate the complex interactions of age, gender, rank, and class. To take yet another example, in a Bengali text if a character uses the term “speed money,” it is fairly clear to Bengali readers that the speaker is of the business class, or somebody from the private sector; by the same token, “tea money” or “chai’er poisha” would indicate a government employee. In the English translation no such clues attach automatically to such phrases in conversation. As, along with the short/shorter sentence, Bengali authors increasingly write dialogue-heavy works this problem in translation will loom larger.

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An increasing number of English words are being used in everyday speech among all classes—in towns and villages, in homes, streets, alleys, riverboats, gullies, haat-bazaars, and in offices. The volume, variety and pace of this assimilation now present difficulties in translations at several levels.

At the simplest level is the use of an English word or phrase in the Bengali original. The translator has no other recourse but to use the same word/words in the English translation, but without being able to indicate that it was an English word in the original Bengali text. This absence of indicators robs the translated text of its richness. This effect is compounded in dialogue, since particular social classes or occupations or generations use different English words in different ways. In other words, in the original text it may matter a great deal which speaker or narrator (however unreliable!) uses what English word in her/his Bengali. Without the ability to include that particular signifier, English words in the mouths of all speakers tend to become undifferentiated and lose their “native” texture. The translation as a whole risks becoming artificially smooth and featureless.

A deeper problem is the way English words mediate the relationship between Bengali writers and their readership. This relationship is a fraught one. English, due to its old association with colonial dominance and its current power as a global medium, is acknowledged as the language of power, modernity, and superior knowledge. Bengali writers are well aware of it. The Bengali writer’s deployment of English words, therefore, independent of wanting to recreate “authentic” speech and language and characters, in certain ways can also be a utilization of this power with her/his Bengali readership. The code is usually in the subtext. It may be a conscious placement or use; it can also be a word or phrase whose invocation can effortlessly conjure up meanings beyond the mere meaning of the word itself.

The second type can be seen in Akhteruzzaman Elias’s short story Niruddesh Jatra. The very first sentence is about a rainburst, which the narrator sees as a welcome break from life in this humdrum, monotonous city. Here the English word “monotonous” is used in the Bengali text. Its use signals that the narrator is a bhadralok, to whom ennui is as familiar as Rabindrasangeet (but whose class-sanctioned word is “monotonous,” which furthermore is used to describe not a feeling, but a city). It is a word of the older, educated middle class, now a dying breed. Younger authors have dropped the word from their cultural vocabulary, having lost that sense of genteel boredom that gave rise to its use in the first place. They have other, more current words at their disposal.

An example of the first type of use is seen in Alo Ondhokare Jai by the far younger author Anisul Hoque. His use of certain English words—“visually impaired,”“straight forward” (the last as two separate words)—is deliberate. Hoque is dealing in the currency of the new Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, its universe defined by civil society, corporate power, political correctness, gender equality, good governance, and the like. These words, which represent modern concepts, have power in the original English terms. To translate them into their Bengali equivalents would translate into a loss of that power, a loss in the sense that the author is unable to indicate to his readers that he is hip to this brave new world and its lingo.

In both the examples given above, there is a subtext rich with social and cultural meanings and impossible to convey in an English translation. The translated text again becomes an ironed-out one, without its interesting wrinkles, creases and rumples.

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Slang words represent a different kind of problem. Slang of course is tribal dialect. As globalization touches us, as we travel more, talk more, as myriad television channels beam into our living rooms, as these large numbers of cultural influences bear down on us, slang words are increasing in daily usage. Especially in the speech of young, urbanized Bengalis. Some of it is beginning to show up in the works of younger authors, and it is very difficult to properly convey their sense to readers, even with explanatory notes. Some slang is unique to Bangladesh, as in the case of words and phrases that were born out of our 1971 liberation war. Our Mukti slang. It is rarely used in the old context nowadays but one still encounters it in the odd story from those days or about those days. Some have mutated; for example, “brushfire,” which was very popular during the 1970s to describe gunfire, today has migrated into the drug subculture to mean a substantial hit of “speed” or methamphetamine. Slang can be markers not only of age and gender, but also of education—whether the speaker has been educated abroad or not. It is a translation difficulty in the making, looming large in the future.

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The last point is not a translation point per se, but has implications for the translated text. It is about “proper” versus “improper” pronunciation of English words by Bengalis and their representation by Bengali writers. We are South Asians, and our accents are different; it is as simple as that. The word “risk,” for example, is a common word in Bengali speech. Uttered by a rickshawallah it comes out as “riks,” or more accurately, as “rix”. Similarly, Bangladeshi drivers or car mechanics say “dishtaarb” for “disturb”—as in “Gari’r chaka dishtaarb dita say”. So, how should the Bengali author then write it, as it is pronounced on the street or as if it was pronounced properly? Obviously, as it is pronounced in the Bengali way. However, in Bengali texts these English words are not written in all their beautiful and rich mispronunciations due to the fact, that 1) writers themselves may be unaware of the distortion. And 2) those who are aware, can be reluctant to do so since they fear readers would think that they didn’t know the proper pronunciation or spelling of the English word!

If authenticity is adhered to in the original text, it should be reproduced exactly in the English translation, too. These English words, spoken, in conversation, would be set off against the standard English of the rest of the translated text. The translation would gain in immediacy, authenticity, and texture.

Note also must be made of the development of unique compound words in everyday use—“gatelock” or “goodnews” are examples. It is a product of the Bengali proclivity toward the juktakkhor, the joining of two words to form a single one. These hybrid “English” words give to our everyday speech a flavor and spice that is enlivening and enhancing. Compound words can also be multilingual, as when a bill presented at a stadium eatery which is “transcreated” as the utterly delightful “khabarbill”. Again, such words should be written by Bengali writers as they are spoken and reproduced exactly in translations. This approach de-homogenizes and refreshes the language of the translated text, prevents artificial smoothening, and preserves the original’s living speech in all its spoken glory, reflecting its changing contours and colors.

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The above by no means represent the sum total of problems that come up in translating literary texts from Bengali to English. They are merely some of the more obvious ones.

There are no ready-made and set solutions to these difficulties of translating from Bengali to English. Language is both too intractable and too fluid to lend itself to easy answers, as are literary texts, which are unique and discrete units that form and re-form old problems in new ways. And translations, being transactions between widely disparate cultural-linguistic frameworks, double that difficulty.

What is valuable, I discovered, is to keep on translating. The very process leads to familiarity and expertise, to the development of a sense which can provide resolutions—partial and contingent though they may be—to these recurring puzzles of words and meaning, of text and context. The very process at times yields the solutions.

So, as Kilroy might have said, keep on truckin’ !

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