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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Translation in Praxis

Course Code: ENG5FS112 • Module 4 Notes

Module IV: Translations from Malayalam to English

1. The Challenges of Translating Malayalam into Global English

Translating Malayalam literature into English is an act of cultural de-marginalization, elevating regional South Asian narratives into the global literary sphere. However, Malayalam is a language deeply anchored in lush monsoon geography, matrilineal feudal social histories, caste hierarchies, and rich Dravidian cultural idioms that have no direct equivalents in standard English.

2. Translating Cultural Nuances, Realia & Dialects

- **Kerala Cultural Realia:** Objects and concepts like *nilavilakku*, *kasavu mundu*, *kavu* (sacred groves), *yakshi*, and *kudumba kshethram* resist simple translation. Translators deploy strategies ranging from transliteration with descriptive glossaries (thick translation) to dynamic contextual paraphrasing.
- **Translating Malayalam Dialects:** Kerala possesses sharp regional dialectal variations—Valluvanadan, Malabar/Mappila Malayalam, Travancore, and coastal Latin Christian dialects. Rendering a character's rural Mappila dialect into standard English risks flattening their sociolinguistic identity, while transposing it into Scottish or Cockney English creates bizarre cultural dissonance. The translator must invent subtle syntactic markers and colloquial registers in English to signal non-standard regional speech authentically.

3. Exemplary Malayalam Literary Translations

- **O.N.V. Kurup: "Iniyum Marikkaatha Bhoomi" (Requiem to Earth):**
  O.N.V. Kurup's monumental ecological poem is an apocalyptic lament for our wounded planet, poisoned by human industrial greed. Rich in mythical and cosmic imagery, the poem blends maternal tenderness for Mother Earth with prophetic ecological dread. Translating O.N.V. into English requires finding majestic, solemn poetic diction that captures the sonorous resonance of his classical Malayalam verse without lapsing into Victorian sentimentality.
- **M.T. Vasudevan Nair: "Kathikante Panippura" (The Storyteller's Workshop):**
  M.T. Vasudevan Nair, the grand master of modern Malayalam fiction, reflects on the creative genesis of his stories, his childhood memories of the Bharathapuzha (Nila river), and the crumbling feudal joint-family (*tharavadu*) system. Translating M.T.'s prose requires capturing his introspective melancholy, rhythmic cadence, and deep lyrical nostalgia for vanishing rural Kerala life.
- **N.S. Madhavan: "Higuita" (Fiction):**
  N.S. Madhavan's masterpiece *Higuita* is a landmark of modern Indian short fiction. Set in Delhi, the story parallels the flamboyant, daring style of Colombian goalkeeper René Higuita (who stepped outside his penalty box to play as a sweeper) with Father Geevarghese, a gentle Catholic priest who steps outside his conventional ecclesiastical boundaries to physically rescue a tribal girl (Lucy) from a ruthless local pimp (Jabbar). Translating *Higuita* requires capturing Madhavan's sharp, cosmopolitan prose, the kinetic energy of world football, and the profound moral resonance of liberation theology in contemporary urban India.

Advanced Translation Hermeneutics, Contrastive Linguistics & Translatability (Extension Phase 1)

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- **Domestication versus Foreignization (Lawrence Venuti):** In *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995), Venuti critiques the Anglo-American tradition of "domestication"—violently erasing the foreignness of the source text to produce a smooth, transparent read. Venuti advocates for *foreignization*—deliberately retaining cultural realia, syntactic friction, and foreign linguistic textures to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the source culture.
- **Polysystem Theory & Descriptive Translation Studies (Gideon Toury):** Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury demonstrate that translated literature does not exist in a vacuum; it occupies a specific position within the target culture's literary "polysystem." When a literature is young or in crisis, translations occupy a primary, innovative position, revitalizing the literary landscape.

2. Contrastive Typological Matrix: English vs. Malayalam

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Passive Voice	Natural, frequent in formal, scientific, and journalistic registers.	Periphrastic passive with "peduka" (പെടുക); often sounds awkward or alien.	Converting passive English sentences into natural active Malayalam constructions.
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Translation Term	Disciplinary Domain	Standard Theoretical Definition & Application
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Skopos Theory	Functional Translation	A translation framework formulated by Hans Vermeer stating that the intended function and target audience (skopos) govern the choice of translation methods.
Thick Translation	Postcolonial Hermeneutics	Kwame Anthony Appiah's concept of contextualizing translations with rich footnotes, glossaries, and commentary to respect the cultural depth of marginalized literatures.
False Friends (Faux Amis)	Lexicography	Words in two languages that look or sound similar but carry drastically different meanings, leading to frequent translational blunders.

4. Rigorous Bilingual Translation Protocol (English-Malayalam)

Professional translation execution across Module 4 adheres to a structured four-phase workflow:

- **Phase 1: Source Text Deconstruction (Decoding):** Performing deep grammatical parsing, thematic analysis, tone identification, and highlighting culture-specific realia and idioms.
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