



‘Kasaragodan Cinema’ being Translated: A Critique of the Homogenized Subtitles and the Problematic of Dialect Translation

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Abstract

Malayalam film industry has been marked recently with the production of those films which are popularly called ‘Kasaragodan Cinema’, the word ‘Kasaragodan’ being the Malayalam adjective to say, ‘the cinema of Kasaragod’. ‘Kasaragodan Cinema’ speaks the dialects of Kasaragod, the northern district of Kerala, and its location is set within its geographical terrains. The long-accepted practice of Malayalam cinema to speak the standard language and the story being enacted on an ideal landscape of the Central or South Kerala has been subverted and deconstructed by these films. The presence of multiple dialects in Kasaragod and of the plurality of cultural life in the locality are realized as the identity and strength of the region as well as of these films. During subtitling, the dialogues are translated to the standard dialect of a target language and in the process, the dialects get impaired of



the linguistic identity. Here, the translation becomes problematic that it takes a reductionist approach towards the way 'Kasaragodan Cinema' resist the linguistic hierarchy and it promotes the linguistic hegemony in Malayalam cinema.

This paper proposes to study the subtitling given in English for the Malayalam film, *Thinkalazhcha Nishchayam [Engagement is on Monday]*, taking into consideration the cultural, dialectal, sociolectal and linguistic concerns of the two languages involved in. The methods of translation that are followed, the strategies adopted to reach the utmost semantic equivalence of the target language, the points where the subtitles fail the cultural meaning and the instances of linguistic explication accomplished to decode nonverbal communication are focused in detail. In addition, the tools used to translate the culture-specific concepts and the challenges, if any, are discussed along with.

Keywords: subtitling, dialect translation, cultural translation, linguistic homogenization and decolonization

Ever since the beginning of the translation process, the cultural and dialectal translations remained hard and experimental for translators. Andre Lefevere, the prominent scholar in translation has observed the issue of translating dialects as, "... whenever language moves on illocutionary, rather than on locutionary level ... it threatens to become an aporia for translators" (58). But still, he points towards the strategy adopted by Lindsay in translating Aristophanes that the translator putting the speech of Spartan characters in Scotch dialect of English to impart the comic effect created in the source text (49). In a multilingual community within which different dialects of the same language coexist together, and when each dialect preserves its own cultural and linguistic identity, there emerges the need to look for a corresponding dialect in the target language. Furthermore, the possibility for generating a new form of constructed dialect—a conlang—that may or may not exist in the target language- community, but comprehensible, can be enquired to cross the concerns in dialect translation.

Films are generally identified by the language they speak and are placed before the larger audience outside the linguistic area, with their spoken words got translated to other tongues. Ever since the very beginning of the industry, Malayalam film has been speaking the dialect of the dominant and elite class of a particular region



of the state as the accepted and standard form of the language. Even though there were films that spoke in deviant linguistic forms of specific caste or community or occupational groups, the main stream Malayalam films remained to speak the dominant dialects of Central and South Kerala. They have their cinematographic location set around the same locality where the economic and political power are concentrated ever since the formation of the state.

It is in the second decade of this century, the films which are applauded on account of speaking the minor dialects of Kasaragod began to come up. As the district situates far from the power centres of Kerala, the life, culture and dialects of the region were less represented, though romanticized enough, in the approved and accepted literary world of the state. In this context, this paper tries to critique the subtitles of 'Kasaragodan Cinema' to analyze how far the translated dialogues restrict the transmission of the linguistic identity of the multilingual life of the area. And it also attempts to seek for the alternatives in the methodology of translation that will help to retain the linguistic fragrance of these films in the light of the de-centered politics of the marginalized.

Kasaragod, the northern district of Kerala, shares its political and cultural borders with the state of Karnataka. The region was once the part of South Canara district of Madras state until the formation of language-based states. While Malayalam enjoys the status of official language, the people speak the dialects of Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu, Konkani, Biyari, Marathi, and Urdu. There exist words that are borrowed, corrupted and evolved, commonly within these linguistic groups and in a way, these languages coexist as the dialects of a single tongue on the shared cultural terrains. Hence, the very identity of the region is not one of unified representations, but of the sum of scrambled multitudes, divergent in terms of dialects, rituals and practices. Comparing to the linguistic status of the other districts of Kerala, this diversity is unique in the sense that, the dialect of one locality exhibits its own distinctive usages and syntax. The presence of polyphonic cultural lineage that spread over the geographical plains of Kasaragod has markedly constructed an aesthetic imagination around the symbolic life of the land. The literature and other art forms of the region are, thus, imbued within this imagination of plurality.

Malayalam film has not much explored the landscape and dialects of Kasaragod as the cinematographic locale. It is under-represented mostly because the region as well as the dialect of the area are assumed as underprivileged in terms of its physical distance from the political, cultural and linguistic capitals of the state. But films like *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (*The Mainour and The Witness*, 2017),



Thinkalazhcha Nischayam (*The Engagement is on Monday*, 2021) and *Nna Thaan Kesu Kodu* (*Let you File a Case*, 2022) have explored this region to attract serious responses from both audiences and critics alike, especially for their less trodden linguistic ways. The film, *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum*, has been set in the terrains of Kasaragod, but the central characters, hailing from south to the region, converse in the dominant dialect of Malayalam. While subtitling, the regional dialectal forms used in the dialogues of minor characters, along with the standard dialect, are translated to standard English. The film, *Thinkalazhcha Nischayam* has been narrated in the dialect of Malayalam that is spoken in Kanhangad, the south region of Kasaragod District. Having coloured by the cultural and linguistic specificities of the region, the film deserves the status of one bearing the typical linguistic aura of the locality. The story of *Nna Thaan Kesu Kodu* is set in Cheemeni, a further south locality of Kasaragod and the language spoken is yet another dialect in the smaller area. But, when placed before a linguistic outsider, these three films speak in English, nullifying the politics proposed by the divergent tongues of minority status.

Thinkalazhcha Nishchayam, directed by Senna Hegde, has been celebrated for the regional dialect of the language spoken by the characters to converse among themselves. The story evolves out of the frustration of patriarchal norms which meet difficulty to cope with the liberal notions of the younger generation, especially in the matter of choosing their life-partners. The narrative spreads over the two days in a village home of Kerala when the family go through the preparations for an ‘arranged marriage’ for the young daughter. On the complication that develops when the girl having a choice against that of her parents, the story ends up in her elopement with her lover and later in their reconciliation with the parents. The film stands out as a critique on patriarchal discipline, and along with, it subverts the hegemonic practice of adopting the standard dialect in popular arts.

The regional dialect is seen as reflecting the conflict that arises between the non-compromising patriarchy and the liberative urges sprouting around it. This exploration of the aesthetic possibilities of the northern dialect of Malayalam has been placed along with the cultural landscape of the region. And hence, the verbal and non-verbal communication in the film is seen coloured with the allusions to regional styles and usages, linguistic and social meta-narratives, folk arts and myths and loan-words from English. These cultural signs, in the subtitled text, betrays the source culture that is facilitated by images and kinesics and thereby remains untranslatable to the target language. While studying the subtitles given for the film, in consort with the methodological underpinnings, the cultural and language-specific components of communication are considered in detail. Further, the tactics adopted



to tackle the context and to reach the possible equivalence in semantic construction is examined with specific examples. The methods of explication like ‘addition’, ‘specification’ and ‘reformulation’ (Elisa Perego) are used to compromise with the tough terrains of this non- verbal and kinesic communication.

The process of translation in subtitling, does intersect multiple forms of semantic constructions across varied linguistic and cultural territories. Film is a multi-code system of communication and while translating, the oral and non- verbal communication are replaced by written words in the subtitled text and hence, the description of subtitling, becomes a diasemiotic translation (Gottlieb 245). It is not merely to traverse the geographical lines to share human experiences, but to enjoy the peculiarities of language usage and of cultural life, that the translation exists. As all language communities are culturally constructed, translation process brings the cultural and the linguistic contours into an alien community of readers negating the cultural boundaries. During the process of decoding the multi-code system of a film into the written narrative of subtitling, two distant cultures that are inscribed through two distant linguistic narratives get mediated in terms of ideologies, moral systems and sociocultural structures, seeking to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer the meaning (Hatim & Mason 223).

Subtitling Verbal communication

Along with the shift from the spoken words to written form, the subtitling demands the shift from paralinguistic and cultural elements of communication to reach the utmost level of semiotic transferring. Different dialects, colloquial language, slang and jargon come under a group and are less viable for translation and it, in turn, affects the semiotic texture of the film. In the film under study, the unique features of the spoken dialect remain untranslated and it is problematic to uncover the divergent beauty of the source text before a linguistic foreigner. The subtitles of the film, *Thinkalazhcha Nishchayam*, are analyzed, in terms of the strategies identified by ZoëPettit, to see the compatibility in between the verbal narratives of the source and target texts (45).

A. Omission-The culture-specific reference is omitted

1. ആനക്കാരും പറയുമ്പാ നിന്റൊരു ചേനക്കാരും പറയുന്നത്: making a mountain out of a molehill (*Thinkalazhcha* 02.40).
2. ജാംബവാന്റെ കാലത്തുള്ള പാത്രങ്ങൾ: decade old plates (08.19).
3. പയറിനടിക്കാൻ വെച്ച മരനെട്ത്ത് കടിച്ചിറുല്ലേ ...: Didn't you try to kill yourself... (11.18).



4. പുഞ്ചക്കണ്ടം, മുലക്കണ്ടം, തീക്കണ്ടം മത്ത്: I am so drunk, I can barely feel my body (26.16).

B. Literal Translation- to reach the closely possible concepts in the target language

1. കോൽക്കളി: stick- dance (03.17).
2. അതൊരു കുരു പൊട്ടിച്ചതാ: I popped a pimple (14.53).

C. Borrowing- The original terms from the source language are retained.

1. തെയ്യം: Theyyam (05.29)
2. ഓണം: Onam (22.17)
3. കിണ്ടി: Kindi (36.30)
4. ശബരിമല: Sabarimala (15.21)

D. Equivalence- Similar meaning and function are reached.

1. അമ്പിനും വില്ലിനും അടുക്കുന്നില്ല: they are like chalk and cheese (13.19).

E. Adaptation- to the similar connotation to the original

1. ഒന്നാമത്, എനക്കിത് ഇഷ്ടല്ല: Do I look like I care? (13.38)
2. രണ്ടാട്ടിൻ കട്ട്യോ: Two strong men (24.44)

F. Replacement of the cultural term with deictics- with reference to the context, particularly when supported by a non-screen gesture or a visual clue.

1. വണ്ടി മുമ്പത്തെപ്പോലെ വലിക്കുന്നില്ലല്ലോ: You don't look as dynamic as before (59.03)

G. Generalisation- as neutralisation of the original

1. നിന്നെയെന്താ വീട്ടിൽ കേറ്റിറ്റേ: Haven't they let you inside the house yet (11.41).
2. ജിമിക്കി കമ്മൽ: earrings (22.13)
3. പുളിശ്ശേരി: curry (52.38)
4. ഉൽസവം: temple (3.14)
5. എനെയൊന്ന് നുള്ളിയേ: Pinch me (1.17.42)

H. Explication- involves a paraphrase to explain the cultural term.

1. ചൊവ്വാദോഷം: ...has Mars in her birth chart (58.47).
2. ജാത്യുലുള്ളത് തുത്താപോവ്വാ: It runs in the family (1.31.50).
3. അപ്പീല് ചേര പായിന്ന വീടാന്ന്: Let's not even start talking about their house (1.43.34).



Subtitling Non-verbal communication

Film is a multi-code system and, during subtitling, the spoken text is translated, while all other non-verbal systems usually remain the same, and as a result, the text as a holistic system fails to convey the semantic load in full. As Elisa Perego points out, “At times, the semantic load of nonverbal signs accompanying speech is much more significant than that of the spoken text itself. In such cases the subtitles should make those signs available to the foreign-language audience” (58). As the images and on-screen gesture or a visual clue are placed within a specific geographical, historical, temporal and cultural context, they remain, more or less, untranslatable in the process of subtitling. Shochat and Stam propose the case as,

To graft one language, with its own system of linking sound and gesture, onto the visible behaviour associated with another, then, is to foster a kind of cultural violence and dislocation. Relatively slight when Languages and cultures closely neighbour, this dislocation becomes major when they are more distant, resulting in a clash of cultural repertoires. (51–52)

Subtitling Culture-specific communication

An image is perceived in the cultural and linguistic context of the viewer and hence, in a subtitled text, the paralinguistic elements like images, the sounds and music resist the translation to a foreign context. The crisis is being resolved by explication where the unsaid, implicit and implied information of the source text is expressed overtly and verbally to make it clearer and more informative for a target viewer.

In contrast to cross-cultural signs, the culture-specific signs pose substantial threat to reach equivalence in target language where the strategy of ‘explication’ is adopted widely by the translators. Here, the explicated subtitles are given via ‘addition’, ‘specification’ and ‘reformulation’, to cope up with paralinguistic expressions, images and the sound effects. Different dialects, colloquial usages, slang and jargon and the like come under a group that is less viable for translation and this, in turn, affects the semiotic texture of the film. The subtitles of the films are analyzed, in terms of the strategies identified by Zoë Pettit, to see the compatibility in between the verbal narratives of the source and target texts (45).

A. Addition- Adding details

1. കിട്ടി , കിട്ടി: Yes, yes, more than what I came for. (*Thinkalazhcha* 9.32)



B. Specification- Adding specific meanings

1. നല്ല വലിയാനല്ല: You are smoking like a chimney (59.04)

C. Reformulation- rephrasing the spoken words

No case for this category is noted in the film under study.

Untranslated Verbal and Non-verbal Language

There are issues related with the non- translatability of many culture- specific meta-narratives in the film which are left untranslated or unparaphrased. They are neutralized in the literal translation and remain in-comprehensible for a foreign viewer. The set of untranslated semiotic elements that are retained in the subtitled text, includes the references towards,

A. Other Malayalam films

1. മഹേഷിന്റെ പ്രതികാരം: Maheshinte Prathikaram (37.39)

B. Film actors in Malayalam

1. ഫഹദ് ഫാസിൽ: Fahad Fazil (37.37)
2. ലാലേട്ടൻ: Wow, Mohanlal (1.04.53)
3. മമ്മൂട്ടി: Mammooty (1.30.24)

C. Dialogues and scenes from other films

1. ...ഈ ഹ്യൂമർ സെൻസാസ് എനക്കേറ്റോം ഇഷ്ടപ്പെട്ടത്: Your sense of humour... that's what I like the most (16.31-reference to a piece of dialogue in another Malayalam films)

2. കിണ്ടി: kindi (36.30-reference to a humourous scene another Malayalam Film)

D. References to current social issues

1. ശബരിമല: Sabarimala (15.21) is let unexplicated of its association with gender politics of present Kerala.

E. Kinship terms

1. ഏട്ടൻ (elder brother), ഏച്ചി (elder sister), മച്ചുനിയൻ (maternal cousin), അളിയൻ (brother in law) are either prefixed with 'dear' to show intimacy or neutralized as 'bro' or 'sister' to suit the English viewer.

F. Subtitling English words

English terms spoken in the film are seen either retained ('glamour' 39.25) or



replaced by other more common terms ('range' with network 33. 14; 'ready' with 'prepare' 1.23.50) suiting the target culture. But certain sounds and gestures made to show emotions like distress (15.24) and disapproval (39.47) are omitted in translation which will definitely affect negatively for the good comprehension of the situation. Further, apart from the songs sung in the thematic contexts of the film, the popular and religious songs played in the background, that reveal the pious village morning or the mood of festivities, are omitted from translation and subtitling. The reference to a popular bit of advertisement (1.00.57) also is left unmarked in the process of subtitling.

Problematic of Dialect Translation

Subtitling films, though a recently emerged discourse under the translation studies, has widened its peripheries through linguistic, theoretical and cultural mediations. The film under study has been translated with subtitles for non-Malayalee viewers and for hard-of-hearing and it has met the aim effectively except for the cultural and dialectal features of the location where the text is placed. The tough situation can be dealt with either by looking for a minor dialect of the target language for subtitling or by choosing to colour the language with the peculiarities of the source language. Innovative experiments in the field, like providing additional subtitles to culture-specific images, gestures, sounds and other nonverbal modes of communication will be making the cross-cultural translation more comprehensive and whole (Perogo 59).

A detailed study of the subtitles in English given for the film asserts that, the cultural and linguistic identity shown by the film has been erased during the process of subtitling. While translated to its similar or equivalent ones, the culturally tainted usages and proverbs also are transported into the standard form of target language. In effect, the films got translated to the standard dialect of the target language and get screened before a non- Malayalee, as any other films in Malayalam with subtitles, removed of its dialectic and cultural peculiarities. Along with the shift from the spoken words to written form, the subtitling demands the shift from the specific paralinguistic and cultural features of communication to reach the utmost level of semiotic equivalence in translation.

Towards the decolonizing projects in linguistics that are launched against the linguistic singularity, the innovative methodology of translation has proved to be contributing much. It stands closer to the process of politicizing the ideology of a text that foregrounds into the linguistic hegemony under question. J. Devika, one of the prominent names among the translators of Malayalam to English, argues that the



traditional method of translation are insufficient to absorb the regional spoken word to the translator's English, to be inserted into the trimmed and polished language of the unseen readers. She asserts the significant role of the translator in challenging "the dominant, standard language that erases the words and worlds of the local spoken tongue" (vi). She adds that the literary and linguistic politics of translating the dialect as, "by translating anti-patriarchal writing in Malayalam to English, I seek to preserve the political charge of these writings from the deliberating 'taming' exercises of Malayalam Literary circles" (vii).

Devika experiments with the innovative strategy to absorb the regional spoken word, in her translation of the Malayalam novel, *Kalyaniyennum Dakshayaniyennum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Kata* into *The Sthory of Two Wimmin Named Kalyani and Dakshayani*. The source text is identified and applauded by the literary world of Kerala in terms of its brilliant blending of the northern and southern dialects of Malayalam. While translating, the text, Devika has adopted the style from the frequent dropping of certain vowel sounds in the spoken words of the Malayalam dialects and from the particular style of English pronunciation unique for the Malayalam regions, to formulate the new dialect of English (viii). The newly constructed dialect—conlang—for English is vividly seen in the title of the translated text. Though, not an unfailing method, her central consideration was that the spoken Malayalam of the regional variety should echo in the variant of English. Especially when the very use of regional dialects in a text becomes political by exploring the power relations pertaining to the differences in regions, gender and dialectal status. To question the authority of the privileged dialect is more political and demanding for the future translation process.

Conclusion

The dialectal uniqueness of the Kasaragodan cinema, has been lost in the process of subtitling, when the film under study reach the larger audience outside the state. Translating the dialect into the standard form of the target language is decisive in the case of Kasaragodan cinema, because the film gets victimized in the act of homogenisation and it certainly decolours the distinctive position attained by these films in terms of their linguistic merit.

The subtitling of Kasaragodan films to English has erased the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of the local dialect that is pivotal in the genre called Kasaragodan Cinema. By blurring the unique features and its politics of resistance, the practice nullifies the linguistic politics proposed by minor dialects in their move to achieve public visibility. In the process of dialectal translation, experimenting



with new devices has been proven as the need of the time. When, in the changed context of minor narratives that critique the dominant discourses of hegemonic power relations, translating a text into the regional dialect is rather significant. The preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity constructs agency for marginalized regions, against the homogenization policies of power centres. Hence, new devices and strategies to trace up the cultural and linguistic specifications are to be formulated and this will prove as the stronger instrument for decolonizing the subjugated linguistic and cultural terrains in the future.

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