

THEORY OF TRANSLATION IN PRACTICE AMONG ANCIENT SRI LANKAN WRITERS

by

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From very early times Sinhalese literature had a close connexion with Pali and later with Sanskrit literatures. As is evident from our sources, the earliest Sinhalese literature comprised the translations of Pali commentaries. It is said in the *Dhampiyā-aṭuvā-gāṭapadaya*, an old Sinhalese paraphrase to the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* and the *Sāratthadīpanī*, a subcommentary to the *Samantapāsādikā* of Buddhaghosa, that the commentaries to the Pali canon which were brought to Sri Lanka by the venerated Mahinda were translated into Sinhalese by Sri Lankan scholars.¹ Another such event is recorded in the *Mahāvamsa*. According to this chronicle, a learned *thera* called Mahādhammakathi who lived in the reign of king Buddhādāsa (A.D. 340-368) translated the *Suttapiṭaka* into Sinhalese.² Similarly, the *Cūlavamsa* speaks of Viyayabāhu's translation of the *Dhammasaṅgani*.³ Since none of these translations survive, it is impossible to determine the actual nature of their interpretative art.

Buddhaghosa, who translated some of those Sinhalese commentaries into Pali outlines the main principles of his rendering. By way of illustrating the principles here we cite two passages in translation from the *Samantapāsādikā*, the commentary to the *Vinayapiṭaka* and the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, the commentary to the *Dhammapada* of *Khuddaka Nikāya*. In the introductory verses of the *Samantapāsādikā* Buddhaghosa states. 'After casting off the language there-in (from these Sinhalese commentaries), and condensing detailed accounts but including all authoritative decisions, and without overstepping any Pali idioms, I shall proceed to compose my work'⁴. This statement clearly shows a fourfold characteristic that he intended to aim at in his work, namely, casting off the original language, abridgement of detailed accounts, inclusion of all decisions and keeping in harmony with idiomatic usage of the receptor language. As is implied by these decisive words, Buddhaghosa was not considering a sort of word for word or perfectly literal translation : rather he seemed to have had some attraction towards some sort of free translation which is entirely accurate in meaning. Much the same method, but enjoying more latitude and flexibility, appears to be applied in his translation of the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, a work of literary merit. In the opening verses he says : 'Here I shall cast off that language (Sinhalese) and syntactic peculiarities and render it into Pali, the beautiful language.' Further he says : 'I shall

explain only words of the verses which were not explained there (in the original work) and I shall simply render into Pali every thing other than this according to the meaning of the original.’⁵

As far as these words are concerned his version should differ from the original in two points; the language and additional explanations of certain verses. At the same time, a special stress is laid on the identity of meaning in both the original and the translation. Though this method of translation sounds somewhat distinctive in contrast to that used in the *Samantapāsādikā*, a work lacking literary merit, it also does not claim a simple literal translation. The idea behind this conception of translation may become clearer from a commentarial explanation occurring in the *Dhampīyā-Atuvā-Gāṭapadaya*. Commenting on those words of Buddhaghosa the work says : ‘*arut visin me kīyanemi. pada visin no kīyanemi. pada visin magadha basin kīyanemi.*’⁶ I shall render it in meaning but not in words (of the original). I shall compose it in words of Pali. ‘This makes clear the translator’s intent to preserve the content of the source language without making change or distortion other than the casting off the language. As the Sinhalese originals were lost, the translating process adopted by this celebrated Pali scholar of the 5th century is hardly to be determined and we are not quite sure whether it would be reasonable to compare this with the generally accepted hypotheses describing translation as the decanting of a liquid from one vessel to another, or as the pouring of wine into a new bottle. It is pointed out that both metaphors suggest that there is a single content, the original one, representing one thing or substance remaining unchanged in the translating process.’⁷ However, it is difficult to surmise how much of the total content of the original work is spilled or lost during the operation of decanting or pouring into the new container.

No doubt several other Pali scholars of later times who tried their hand in rendering Sinhalese works into Pali must have adopted much the same principle as this. Or perhaps some of them would have preferred a further modified method with more freedom to decorate or re-create the subject matter of the original work. We find three Pali works with literary merit, two in prose and one in verse, namely, the *Mahābodhivamsa*, *Thūpavamsa* and *Dāthāvamsa*, which perhaps exemplify a new process of literary translation that appears to have enjoyed much latitude in handling the subject matter. All three compositions acknowledge their indebtedness to original works in Sinhalese which were probably known by the same name as the new version in Pali. But they do not specifically express that they are dealing with a particular translating process. Each author appears to have preferred to denote his work as a new production rather than a translation.⁸ Unlike Buddhaghosa none of them makes any comment on the authenticity or faithfulness of his composition in respect to the original work. The subject matter

extracted from the original work may have been lavishly elaborated in accordance with poetical and stylistic devices. It may not be unjustified to suppose, under such circumstances, that the subject matter of the original did meet with additions and changes, possibly engendered by the author's individual urge and originality. However, it must be stressed in this connexion that we are not in such a position to reach a definite conclusion concerning the nature of these versions, for none of their original works is extant.

There are quite a number of Sinhalese paraphrases to Pali and Sanskrit works, literary or otherwise, which actually constitute the earliest or primitive form⁹ of translation in Sinhalese. Though they are known by different terms, namely, *gāṭapada*, *sanna* and *piṭapota*,¹⁰ in fact they are nothing but glossarial works of word for word translation with some annotations. The earliest survival of the kind is the *Dhampiyā-atuva-gāṭapadaya*, which is reputed to have been written by the king Kassapa V. The work, also called the *Dhampiyā-atuvā-sannaya*, furnishes Sinhalese equivalents to the words selected from the original text, that were considered obscure or difficult of comprehension, in addition to giving some detailed descriptions or annotations in commentarial character. The *Vesaturudā-sanne* and *Mahābodhivaṃsa-granthipadaya* are another two important works of this category. They seem to have selected more words for exposition added various annotations grammatical or otherwise. The *Mahābodhivaṃsa-granthipadaya* is abundant in such annotations contrasting with the other two works. Apart from the formal word-by-word paraphrase it accumulates quite a number of commentarial details in which it tries to trace the source of the original where it needs such explanations. It is of note that none of these early exegeses provides the meaning of every word in the original work. But a great improvement in this process appears in Sinhalese paraphrases which came into circulation from the late Polonnaru period onwards. The works known by the fixed term 'sanne' contain a complete word for word paraphrase.¹¹ For this sort of paraphrase, good examples are the *Meghadūta-sanne* and *Jānakīharana-sanne* which are assigned to the later part of the Polonnaruva period.¹² As is apparent from an old *Sasadāvata-sannaya* this sort of paraphrase became so popular among the Sri Lankan scholars as well as students that some scholars produced such paraphrases even to Sinhalese poems.

The purpose of paraphrases, whether they be *gāṭapadas*, *piṭapotas*, or *sannes* is quite clear. All of them were intended to facilitate the study or understanding of the originals in their real form. No doubt this purpose must have resulted more effectively from *sannes*, that is, complete verble paraphrase, than from the other two sorts. All these categories, whatever may be the fundamental differences in the nature of their paraphrasing, are connected inseparably to their originals. Each certainly calls for intimate acquaintance with the source language in which the original is written. Accor-

dingly, the underlying principle of these paraphrases must be perfect literalness or faithfulness to the original work. Under this method, the author of the paraphrase might have thought of avoiding every distortion or change of the subject matter in the source language. Therefore he had to take all measures to provide all sorts of explanatory portions pertinent to the perception of the student of the translation. It is certain that this method was intended to bring the subject matter of the original text to the realm of the reader's own language by removing the language barrier. It insisted on the reader's studying the original language instead of just facilitating his understanding the matter in the work. Thus, this type of paraphrase imposes a very heavy burden on the reader and it takes him long to complete the reading of the original text.

However, certain attempts were made by Sinhalese writers to remove this burden by breaking the language barrier. The first surviving example of such an attempt is the *Siyabaslakara*, the earliest extant work on Sinhalese poetics, which closely followed the *Kāvyaḍarśa* of Dandin. As is asserted in the introduction the work is intended to meet the demands of those who did not know earlier works on poetics and those who did not study Sanskrit.¹³ The work makes no mention regarding the translating process. Neither does it comment on its original work. As we know the *Siyabaslakara* is totally designed withing the basis of the *Kāvyaḍarśa*. But it is not a perfect copy of the original. Instead of covering the entire subject matter the author preferred to select a considerable part of it which he considered the most essential and appropriate to the Sinhalese poetic tradition. He left out certain matters which he found difficult to apply properly to Sinhalese poetry. And at the same time he added new things in order to illustrate certain theoretical facts, especially where he found that the original examples were not sufficient to convey what was really intended.¹⁴ Some times certain names of *Alaṅkāras* were replaced by new, presumably popular native names.¹⁵ Apart from these exceptions, the author of the *Siyabaslakara* gives the most faithful or literal translation of the original work. To illustrate the nature of the translating process in the *Siyabaslakara* we may quote a few verses from both the original and the translation :

‘vastu kiñcidabhipretya-tattulyāsyanyavastunah
uktih sankseparūpatvāt-sā samāsoktirucyate
pibanmadhu yathā kāmaṃ-bhramarah phulla pankaje
apyasannaddhasaurabhyaṃ-paṣya cumbati kuḍmalam
‘vatak yam kiyāṭiva-eme vat vāni an vatak
pavasat sakev rūnen-samāsaya yet he mesē
bomin mī risi sē-bamara supul piyūmehi
piyaganda no pat kalhidu-bala elambe nava muhulu ’¹⁶

Here the first two verses cited from the *Kāvyaḍarśa* contain the theory and the illustration of an *alaṅkāra* called *samāsokti* while the second two verses from the *Siyabaslakara* reclothe the essential meaning of the original tongue. In this respect the translator appears to have followed so closely the original verses that his version makes no difference at all in respect of the original.

Sinhalese version gives the exact meaning of the original verses following them word by word. Thus in fact it represents an identical entity with the original. During the operation of turning the Sanskrit verses into Sinhalese, the translator was able to retain not only the identical meaning but also a metrical form. In this case he seems not to have wished to make any kind of reduction or addition. Even though he followed this type of literal translation in most cases he was unable to retain it throughout the work. Since he asserted his preference to select certain essential portions from the original and to be in harmony with Sinhalese linguistic and poetic tradition,¹⁷ he made certain alterations by reducing some features and adding certain others. Thus his version cannot be called an absolute literal translation of the original.

Now it is quite clear from this discussion that two types of translating process, viz., literal and free were in practice among the Sri Lankan translators of early periods. The first category includes all sorts of word for word translations which asserted the identity of the subject matter in the original language. The other category consists of all the other sorts of interpretative and descriptive or decorative methods including any type of alteration, such as addition, reduction, abridgement or substitution. While the first kind placed stress on faithfulness to the original the latter kind laid stress on the essence or particular feature of the subject matter in the original text instead of on the absolute identity of meaning as referred to in the former type. The distinction between these two types of translation can well be illustrated by the following pair of alternatives formulated by a modern theorist of the art of translation :

- (i) 'A translation must give the words of the original, and
- (ii) A translation must give the ideas of the original.'¹⁸

As is apparent from our Sinhalese prose works like the *Butsarana*, *Saddharma-ratnāvaliya* and *Sinhala Jātaka-pota* for most of our creative writers, the latter type had perhaps more attraction than the former. These works which enjoyed more freedom in their renderings of the subject matter drawn from Pali sources tended to elaborate at large in accordance with poetical devices. Compared with these works Gurulugomi's rendering of *Amāvatura* which has distinctive characteristics, linguistic and otherwise, seems to have followed a different path with less freedom. Though it sometimes omits certain words and changes their order so as to make the version more precise in meaning almost always tries to retain not only the identical meaning but also stylistic peculiarities of the original. It is therefore not unreasonable to surmise that for Gurulugomi the former category had more attraction than the latter.

NOTES

1. *Dhampiyā-aṭuvā-gāṭapadaya*, ed. D. B. Jayatilaka, Colombo, 1932, p. 6.
Sāratthadīpanī, ed. B. Devarakkhita, Colombo, 1914, p. 16.
2. *Mahāvamsa*, ed. H. Sumangala and Batuvantudava, Colombo, 1908, ch. 37, v. 175.
3. *Cūlavamsa*, ed. W. Geiger, London, 1927, ch. 60, v. 17.
4. *Samantapāsādikā*, ed. B. Piyaratna and W. Sorata, Colombo, 1929, I, p. I.
5. *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, ed. K. Ratanasara, Colombo, 1922, I, p. I.
6. Dham. g. p. 8.
7. Renato Poggioli, 'The added Artificer', 'On Translation', ed R. A. Brower, Cambridge, 1959, p. 140.
8. The author of the *Mahābodhivamsa* uses the word '*racayanto*' to denote that he is composing the work in Pali whereas Buddhaghosa used '*tantibhāsam āropayitvā*' which means 'having turned into Pali.'
See, *Mahābodhivamsa*, ed. Sobhita, Colombo, 1890, p. I.
Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā, p. I.
9. Theodore Savory, *The Art of Translation*, London, 1968, p. 51.
10. An attempt is made by D. E. Hettiaratchi to distinguish the meaning of these terms.
See *Vesaturudāsanne*, ed. Hettiaratchi, Colombo, 1950, Introduction, pp. 72-78 ff.
11. *Vesaturudāsanne*, Introduction, p. 76.
12. C. E. Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature*, Colombo, 1955, pp. 140-141.
13. *Siyabaslakara*, ed. H. Gnanatilaka and Gnanasiha, Colombo, 1933, ch. I, v. 3.
14. *Ibid.*, ch. 2, vv. 263, 322.
15. *Ibid.*, ch. 2, vv. 75, 232.
16. 'Having a certain object in mind when an assertion is made about another object analogous to it, that, as being a shortened mode (of expression), is called inclusive assertion. In the full-blown lotus, while sipping honey according to his desire, the bee, mark you, is now kissing a bud in which the fragrance is not yet developed.'
Kāvyaḍarśa, ed. S. K. Belvalkar, Poona, 1924, ch. 2, vv. 205, 206.
The same meaning is re clothed in the second two verses of *Siyabaslakara*, ch. II, vv. 218, 219.
17. *Ibid.*, ch. I, v. 32.
18. Theodore Savory, *op. cit.*, p. 50.